Hannigram: Cuts Unscene -- Season 3

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Hannigram: Cuts Unscene -- Season 3

by DBMars

Summary

What if Will and Hannibal had been intimate all along, beginning with the pilot episode? I set out to answer that question. Cuts Unscene is the result.

In this companion fic to your next re-watch, Will and Hannibal have an intimate interaction in every episode that builds their romantic connection, operating on the concept that they were actual scenes cut from the original episodes -- canon compliant as possible!

For an optimal experience, watch the episode, then pause it at the indicated timestamp and read the "deleted scene" before pressing play again.

This series also includes SEASON 4 IN CUBA!

“Beautiful killer, I wonder at what you have become."

Notes

Season 3 Episode 1: Antipasto

Companion Song: “Prayers for Rain” – The Cure

“You shatter me, your grip on me
A hold on me so dull it kills
You stifle me
Infectious sense of hopelessness and prayers for rain
I suffocate, I breathe in dirt
And nowhere shines but desolate
And drab the hours all spent on killing time
Again all waiting for the rain
You fracture me, your hands on me
A touch so plain, so stale it kills
You strangle me, entangle me
In hopelessness and prayers for rain
I deteriorate, I live in dirt, and nowhere glows but
Drearily and tired the hours all spent on killing
Time again all waiting for the rain

You fracture me, your hands on me
A touch so plain, so stale it kills
You strangle me, entangle me
In hopelessness and prayers for rain
Prayers for rain
Prayers for rain
Prayers for rain”

Season 3 Episode 1: Antipasto

Paris opens herself to me as though I am her surgeon, mapping her neural network with my scalpel, slicing through her as she lives and breathes, vivisection by motorbike. I follow her richest artery, the Seine, bound for a hall near the Sorbonne.

I love Paris. I have always loved Paris, yet it has taken on a kind of bleached overexposure, in every sense I possess, a chemical fading one might see in old photographs. It is not the Paris I had hoped to find. Paris has lost a portion of her vibrancy, and I fear it will never be the same.

If only it would rain. Paris in the rain takes on a phantasmagoric quality as the lights from cars, art nouveau street lamps, and the neon of restaurants, bars, or *caves* mingle together in the puddles that gather on these ancient Roman roads, hoarding a myriad of hues that might encourage one to think of the rainbow road of Norse mythology. I feel if I could see her in the rain, the colors would return.

Paris is dry and dull to me because I do not fly through her streets with Will sitting behind me, his arms around me as we weave dangerously in and out of traffic. I can almost feel his arms clasped around my chest, his hips pressed into mine.

No. I refuse these trifling fantasies and focus on the task at hand.

I find Dr. Fell's reception. The dress is informal enough I can slip in unnoticed. I wander through the crowd, surveying the *hors d'oeuvres* and the stacks of Fell's latest publication, another volume of his drivel that the people at this soirée have deemed worthy of celebration.

I find my mark. Roman Fell stands in a tight group of his friends, and perhaps a few of his enemies. I study his mannerisms, strain my ears to hear the way he talks, the names of people he knows. When I kill him and step into his identity, I will elevate his existence and his academic reputation beyond what it ever could have been. I will help him craft a much more admirable legacy.

In my peripheral vision I see someone watching me. He is being blatant about it, his eyes as deliberate as though he'd put his hand on my shoulder. In the undefined sideview my eyes provide, I recognize him.

Will Graham.

I know it cannot be Will, but for a long moment, I let myself believe. I give in to the weakness. Time has passed. I know Will is alive. I submit to my deepest hope, that he has come across the ocean to find me. I do not pray, but I extend my intention, my desire, out into the cold, unfeeling cosmos.

Let it be Will.

Let him come to me, embrace me, forgive me, kiss me. We will walk out of this room and into the night, where Paris will have regained her color and her *joie de vivre* . I will lead him to the river and we will pass beneath the bridges, merging with their shadows.

I do not want to look at this man. It will spoil the image.

Like Orpheus, I cannot stop myself.

He is looking directly at me, his face coy but clearly interested. Yes, he resembles Will, at least superficially. Same dark hair, cut of the cheekbone, similar style of dress. But it is not Will. The Will in my mind is whisked back to the Underworld, gone forever. I am left to compose songs to make the gods weep. My end will be violent – torn apart, my pieces scattered, everything lost but my head and my lyre.

The man interprets my accounting of his similarities to Will Graham as a deliberate once-over, and approaches. “Antony Dimmond.”

“Boris Jakov,” I say. This is the name on my forged passport. Soon, my name will be Roman Fell.

Antony Dimmond is charming. He has Will’s ability to strip away appearances, and his commentary is wry and humorous while still being appropriately self-deprecating. Yet he has the smooth confidence of a man who knows himself and his attraction. He doesn’t need me to see his worth. He knows he is lovely, and it is infuriating.

I check myself as he speaks. It only infuriates me because it is not Will, who was only just learning that he was beautiful, and was convinced that only I could see it. As if I alone were privy to his luminous eyes, the soft curl of his hair, rich and dark – as if his smile was mine alone, the line of his jaw my well-kept secret. I cannot expect to ever possess such a creature again.

Still, this does not stop me from thinking about killing this imposter. And then I think of other things I would like to do to him.

“It takes me six to eight months to write one line,” Antony says with a little chuckle.

“Why?”

“Poetry is hard. Too hard for Roman. Well, it’s easier for him to slide into academia and dissect the work of others than it is to stand by his own words.”

I find myself smiling genuinely for the first time in recent memory. He has brought that out in me, as Will used to. “One can appreciate another’s words without dissecting them. Though on occasion, dissection is the only thing that will do.”

We both glance over to the bar, where someone has decided it was advisable to open a bottle of champagne with a saber. The foam spills out on the floor amid the laughter, and people hold out their glasses, trying to catch it. It is wasteful, an unnecessary show, and, worst of all, poorly executed.

“How long will you be in Paris?” Antony asks, snagging a fresh glass of champagne from a passing tray.

“Two more weeks, give or take,” I reply, watching Roman Fell out of the corner of my eye. He is still basking in the congratulations of his colleagues and the party shows no sign of winding down. “And you, Mr. Dimmond?”

“Antony, please. I’m headed back to London tomorrow. Imagine, this dreary ode to Roman’s latest so-called achievement is how I’ll be spending my last night in Paris.” He sighs with a dramatic flair and another winning smile. “So, Mr. Jakov, forgive me if I’m being insufferably forward, but would you like to get out of here?”

This party could go on for hours, showing no signs of winding down. The longer I stay, the more likely I will be noticed.

And I want to go with him.

“After you,” I say. Dimmond smirks, pleased with himself. He abandons the glass on a nearby table and we walk out of the party together into the evening’s soft chill. His hotel isn’t far, modest but chic, delicate touches of art nouveau. We have a drink at the little bar attached to the lobby. I ask him about his poetry. He talks. He parades out his wit to impress me. I am suitably impressed. He is suitably inebriated, tripping over his words every so often. He talks more in this state, but with less precision. Will is the opposite. While it loosens his tongue, his words are clarified by his uninhibited state of mind. He is finally free to say what he means.

It wasn’t a risk. I know you wanted me to do that.

Antony makes an excuse for us to go up to his room. Something about needing to write down a line of poetry he’s just thought of, positioning me as his muse. I order a glass of bottom-shelf whiskey and take it with me.

He offers to hang up my coat in the room’s slender closet, and seems pleased that I accept, as if it solidifies a certainty in his mind. A certainty in my mind is solidified when he takes off his shoes and sits on the bed instead of the other chair at the small desk.

We talk, or rather, he talks and I listen, offering my responses generously as they are warranted. He tells me I remind him very much of the first man he experienced intercourse with, a friend of his father’s that stayed the summer with Antony’s family at a villa in Tuscany. He’d been seventeen, a budding poet, very impressionable, and the man had broken his heart when he’d left at the end of the holiday. I take this as an invitation to join him on the bed, and my actions are warmly received. He runs his hand from my knee to my thigh, then touches me with clear intentions. I let myself place my palm against the side of his face and he draws closer.

I stop him before our lips can touch, and gesture to the glass of whiskey I left on the nightstand. “Drink it first,” I direct him.

“You don’t have to get me drunk to make this happen.” Antony presses his hand more firmly between my legs to measure my response.

“You said I inspired memories in you. I would have you do the same.”

He tilts his head and smiles, picking up the glass. “Someone special was a whiskey drinker?”

I do not respond. I focus only on keeping my mask pleasant and amorous.

He humors me and drinks it in a shot. Before the scent fades from the air I kiss him. I do so with my eyes closed. I chastise myself for this weakness. Will once told me I was inevitable. This feels inevitable, despite my life’s insistence that there is no fate but that which one creates for oneself.

I touch his hair, his face, I trail my fingers down his throat and I give myself over to the flight of fancy, an admission of my weakness, the same terrifying weakness that Will always brought out in me, commanding me to take leave of my senses. I use my considerably detailed imagination to pretend it’s Will I’m kissing, aided by the sense memory of the spirit on his lips and tongue. The lie I tell myself gives me the most exquisite relief, a taste of the Angel-Maker’s sweet and easy peace.

I break away to kiss his throat, run my tongue against it, hoping it tastes like Will’s. He spoils it by speaking. “You’re quite the romantic, Boris.”

“Can one be anything else in Paris?” I counter, getting up to slide out of my shoes. I go around the bed to the other side to turn off the light. It will be easier for me to disassociate if the lights are off. There is a small toiletry bag stationed at the base of the lamp, unzipped already, prophylactics and lubricant inside. Mr. Dimmond is bewitching, and used to getting what he wants. I am not the only stranger he’s brought back to this room during his stay. Again, I consider killing him. I would make it very intimate. Strangulation, perhaps. A blow to the head first to stun him, give him a few moments to consider what his charm has earned him.

Antony comes to me on his knees on the bed, his parted lips a tempting invitation. Against my will I am again transported through time, the fabric folding against itself in my mind.

It’s you. This is your bed.

I kiss him again as he undresses me. I touch his hair, so like Will’s in texture and color, the way it falls against the top of his ear, curls over his forehead. I unclasp the buttons of his shirt, just the first few, before he gets impatient and pulls it over his head. He has more body hair than Will, whose chest is alluringly smooth. I have licked every inch of that skin; nipples, pectorals, sternum, clavicle, acromion, trapezius. If there is any minuscule section that I may have missed, it is gone from me forever now, as lost to me as Eurydice from Orpheus.

I am delighted to see how similar his genitalia is to Will’s, nearly the same size and girth. He is pleased by my insistent fellatio. It is very simple to keep my eyes closed in this position, on my knees by the bedside as if I plan to pray, splaying my hands over his thighs and picturing

Will sitting on the mattress instead. Antony plays his part well, touching my hair as affectionately as Will might have, making the requisite sounds, murmuring the appreciative words. He tries to warn me that he won't last, then warns me his orgasm is close; I ignore all of this and eagerly let him finish.

He tastes very different from Will. Will's always had a sweet undertone that reminded me of the scent of honeysuckle trapped in a bodily flavor. Still, I swallow dutifully. I have no qualms about consuming him, though I suspect his kidneys would taste better.

With a satisfied sigh, he falls back on the bed, pays me compliments that I only half-hear. My desire is painful. It feels like an extended agony with no promise of release. I understand that I can physically orgasm, but I do not expect it to alleviate me psychologically. I can only hope I can fool myself at just the right moment. This will be easier if I can position myself behind him.

I undress entirely. He sits up to attempt fellatio; I explain carefully that I would like to penetrate him. Antony smirks, and informs me that he doesn't usually receive, but he will make an exception for me. Considering how he responds to me fingering him, I doubt his claims, but I keep my observations to myself, as he has been accommodating, and continues to be so.

Preparing him is easy, but facing him, watching his responses to gauge his readiness tears me away from the fantasy I wish to embrace. I pause to chase the last drops of whiskey from the glass and put them on his lips with my free hand before I kiss him, my forefinger joined by my middle now. I treat him as I would handle Will in this moment, as I would worship Will in his beautiful entirety. I kiss him, I draw my tongue along his neck from the hollow of his throat over the swell of his laryngeal prominence, I put my teeth gently against his clavicle for a harmless, domesticated bite, the gentle reminder of my dominance.

He submits, far more willingly than he eluded, his subterfuge a function of his ego. An ego that Will never had, that was driven out of him from childhood, destroyed by a mother's abandonment, a father's emotional negligence, an aunt's disapproval, the Catholic Church's assertion that he was a sinner from birth, and the Baptists' declaration that he had the devil in him. Society's insistence that he was emotionally disfigured. Alana's rejections.

Yet another reason I must applaud poor Abigail for shoving Dr. Bloom out the window.

I consider putting my teeth against his nipple to elicit further arousal, but I do not. Antony has too much hair to keep up the illusion I so desperately chase. I guide him onto his stomach and remove a condom from its packaging, sliding it on and applying more lubricant to ease my way and prevent any pain. I intend to be forceful and I do not want him to try and stop me. I grasp myself firmly and push against his entrance, moving easily past his verge and the first ring of muscle. It takes him a few moments to relax so that I may continue. And then I am enveloped in him, cradled in his body, waiting as patiently as I can for him to settle into ease. I ask him softly if he is comfortable, and he nods.

I begin with a gentle rocking of my hips, holding him by the ribs and running my other hand along his thigh. It is not long before I cannot temper my movement further. The noises he makes are anguished but pleasured. He is facing away from me, and in the darkness, I can

pretend he has a knife scar over his rotator cuff, and the shadow of a bullet wound in his deltoid. With the same conjuring I use to build rooms in my mind palace, I make my eyes see what I wish them to see.

This is Will. He is mine. I have made him mine and he has come back to me, as I knew he would. I feel how Achilles would have felt if Patroclus had returned from the battlefield that day, thrown off his borrowed armor and begged for my forgiveness and my love. Will and I could have toppled the Trojans we faced without any kind of divine intervention, save the divinity I was born with and that I have given to him by way of my love.

I thrust until my muscles burn, my body begging for release. But it is not until he looks back at me, and my mind blurs his features, rearranges them. It is as if Will himself is here, looking back at me, his perfect mouth open, his clear eyes the color of the Aegean we crossed together. I blink; it is still Will I see, but his face is smeared with blood.

I climax. In that moment, and the following precious few, I do feel it – the sweet and easy peace, the way I used to feel encased in Will's warmth, knowing he was counting down the moments before he could embrace me, lay in my embrace with his head under my chin or against my chest, ear over my heart. His beauty was always in his dichotomy, how he existed in a state of dangerous tenderness, a killer who wanted me to hold him, who felt safe and protected in my arms, desperate for the love he'd never received at any point in his lonely life.

I have been given love before. Been lavished with it, spoiled on it. Even now, Bedelia has her hopes.

His love was the only love I ever *wanted* .

This realization paralyzes me for a few moments. He looks back at me again, and he is Antony Dimmond, which shocks my mind back into reality, a phonograph needle falling into the groove.

I remove myself from his cavity and excuse myself to the washroom, where I dispose of the condom and clean the traces from me. When I return to him, I glance at the clock and manufacture some rueful goodbyes. He is drunk and very satisfied, so he does not protest more than what is polite. It is kind of him to offer me a place to sleep. I wonder if he did so for the last stranger he invited into this bed, and I doubt it. He is clinging to the memory of the man who took his virginity. That was the role I was meant to play tonight, and I have played it well. Well enough that he lifts his exhausted head long enough to tear out the back page of a book of poems and write down his telephone number on it. I take it out of decorum. I don't expect to see Antony Dimmond again.

Roman Fell's party is less lively than when I left it, but a quick glance through the window reveals he is still inside. I return to my motorbike and sit astride it, waiting for him. My mind is clearer than it has been since Bedelia and I fled Baltimore that rainy night. I am perfectly aware of what I have done, and for now, I can accept that Will Graham has made me into a pathetic, mewling thing that would do something as degrading and ridiculous as have sex with a man that looks vaguely like him. It reminds me of eating to live, not living to eat, a

soldier opening a meal in a bag to shovel into his mouth in the quiet hours before the morning's assault.

The release has calmed me, and the vigorous intercourse has made me hungry for sustenance of body and soul. Hunger sharpens the edges of the world.

Roman Fell leaves his party, gait unsteady, full of champagne and congratulations.

" *Bon soir* ," I say as he passes me. I am announcing my presence. I am giving him a chance to escape, as it is only fair. It is what Will gave me – a warning, wrapped in the scent of an odious woman who was supposed to have been his victim.

" *Bon soir* ," he replies, a bit uncertain. He wonders if he is supposed to know me, and may remember my face from the party. His lack of recollection does not trouble him overmuch. He hails a taxi. I begin my vivisection of Paris again, a blood cell traversing her veins and arteries. I split lanes and I am lucky with the lights and arrive before him. I park the motorbike and wait. He gets out of the cab and makes his way toward me, fishing in his pocket for his keys. Roman Fell catches sight of me and his brows knit in dumb confusion, my presence confounding, at odds with his reality.

" *Bon soir* ," I say again.

He stutters, but I have let myself loose, uncoiling like a serpent. There is no deterring my strike. It unleashes against his face and behind it is the strength I have derived from my pain, now funneled and focused thanks to what I allowed myself with Antony Dimmond. The head trauma causes a massive swollen area of his brain that drops him unconscious. He crumples on the cobblestones. I move the motorbike further from the entrance and use his keys to get inside, carrying him with me on my shoulder as if he's too drunk to walk.

The Fells have some taste, more than I would have given them credit for. The home is elegant. It will be easier to become Roman Fell knowing this.

I remove and hang up his coat, then carry him to the washroom. I open his neck over the tub and bleed him out, then tear down the shower curtain and lay his body on it. I check the time. Mrs. Fell will be home within the hour, but I'm famished. The hunger rears up my throat and it will not be ignored. I cut into Roman Fell's abdomen and carve myself a piece of his liver.

Their cookware is also acceptable, though I do not often use stainless steel. They are French, so I find a hunk of real butter in the icebox, and use it to cook the liver. It is so fresh it does not need much for seasoning, just a dusting of salt. I admire the Fells' gramophone, and play an aria from *Don Pasquale,* the perfect side dish for my meal .

Sogno soave e casto de' miei prim'anni, addio.

Sweet and chaste dreams of my first years, goodbye!

Lydia Fell arrives home. She walks into the dining room with a sweet smile on her face, thinking, perhaps, that her husband has brought home a late dinner. I am certain he never cooks, but she would appreciate the gesture nonetheless.

“ *Bon soir* ,” I say, after I have finished chewing, of course. No situation, even murder, is one to be *laissez faire* with one’s manners.

After I have choked her to death, I feel almost like myself for the first time since I slid the knife into Will’s abdominal cavity.

***

“We are among the palaces built six hundred years ago by the merchant princes , the kingmakers, and the connivers of Renaissance Florence.” I offer Bedelia her drink.

“As connivers of modern Florence,” she says.

She has made her disapproval clear all evening by the timbre of her voice, the minutiae of her facial expressions, the edge of her words.

“I found a peace here that I would preserve. I’ve killed hardly anybody during our residence,” I remind her.

Still, I observe the caution she wishes to impart by the things she says and the things she does not say. She accuses me of being more interested in making appearances than maintaining them. I remind her that I won the curator’s position fairly on my merits, never mind that I created the vacancy. She knows I have considered killing and eating Professor Sogliato – how could she not make the inference? But the peace must be preserved. I don’t need to kill him. I can humiliate him as I choose. As an intellect, he is no threat.

Though if he insists on such public displays of rudeness in the future, I may have to rethink my mercy.

Bedelia attempts to seduce me again as she prepares for her bath, giving me a significant look as she asks me to unfasten her dress. She slides out of it, assuring herself that I am watching. I do watch. And then I turn away. I have no use for her in that fashion at this moment. It affords me no advantage and it would bring me no pleasure. I am still satisfied by my encounter in Paris, and I am certain I will not need another like it. I have said my goodbyes.

I acquiesce as we lay in bed that night, but only to hold her. No doubt she still feels guilty for not being able to supply me with what I needed back in Baltimore.

I’m sorry I didn’t provide you with a suitable substitute for therapy. Is Will Graham still alive?

Will Graham was not a suitable substitute for therapy.

Even if we had engaged in a sexual relationship after she’d killed our mutual patient, she would never have fulfilled me the way Will did. However, it was no advantage to admit this in the moment, or now. Or ever.

Because it wasn’t an arrow that pierced my heel. It was allowing myself to stand on the precipice and be tempted to leap, to fall headlong into human sentiment.

My weakness was that I very nearly betrayed everything I am to love, or what I can only assume to be love, since I have never experienced it. And having come so close to tumbling to my ruin, I will never allow such a thing to happen again.

***

I prefer to keep the peace. It is advantageous. Each day when I traverse the Piazza del Duomo I am reminded that I have made a place for myself in this world that is worth defending. Even if the onslaught comes from within.

I am slipping.

I attempt to curb my thoughts of Baltimore by working long hours at the museum, preserving implements of torture from humanity's darkest days. When handling these artifacts, considering them for extended periods of time, one inevitably imagines oneself subjected to these tortures. I try to imagine the Pear of Anguish cracking my jaw. I wonder how long I would last on the rack.

Over time, however, one ceases to imagine oneself as the victim, and instead supplants the self with the enemy.

In my mind, I affix Will to the rack, sliding his hands and feet into the rough ropes, fixing the knots. He does not resist, merely watches me with gleaming interest, stripped, as a prisoner would be, to his undergarment, a sheen of sweat glistening on his exposed chest. I go to the crank wheel, slide my hands over the rough wood, and prepare to turn it with all the force I possess. I will separate his joints, crippling him for the short life he has left to live, and I will relish his screams the same way I experience Bach or Debussy.

Yet, the mental projection of myself does not coil his muscles and crank the wheel with every fiber of strength available to him. He merely gives the wheel a gentle half-turn, just enough to make the ropes taut and apply a little pressure. He turns it again to threaten the damage this implement *could* do. Will arches his head back with a sigh that indicates he has embraced his helplessness, relishes in it. I have heard this sigh before.

And then I climb onto the rack with him, press myself against his body, and revel in his helpless state, bringing my lips to his throat, my intentions changing. I will torture him another way by denying him satisfaction until I wish to give it, only after I've made him beg.

Please.

I have never heard a word so beautiful pass between human lips.

I rip his last garment away and produce the Pear of Anguish. Perhaps now I will deliver my retribution.

I do not. As much as I try to force my mind to picture it ripping him open, I instead use it gently to apply sensation to his prostate while I perform fellatio, edging him close to orgasm. I feel his muscle fibers coiling for release and I slide him out. He curses me lovingly, foul words coming from a Botticelli mouth, lashes so black against his petal skin as he writhes

amorously in my grasp. He has made it impossible, in this moment, not to penetrate him and glut myself on my own pleasures.

I open my eyes and stand up from my stool, moving quickly for the window, praying the sight of the Piazza del Duomo soaked in cleansing rain will force these unwanted images away. Again and again as I work in the museum I imagine Will suffering its many devices, but only as a sexual display where I have power over him, and he submits entirely to my whims. There are times where I am forced to do something as base as relieve myself in the washroom when it becomes too much.

As strong as my desire is to torture Will, his continued existence tortures me in kind. I gutted him so he would know what I experienced the moment I encountered Freddie Lounds' scent on him. What it was like to ask him to abandon our plan to kill and eat Jack and walk away into our new life, only to have him refuse over and over, to insist on the Last Supper.

I tell you the truth. One of you will betray me.

I have to keep the peace.

***

Fate, or chance, insists otherwise.

It has been a productive afternoon. I have only thought of Will long enough to picture breaking his thumbs in a press. Stepping out onto the ancient stones of the palazzo, I smile and begin my brisk walk home.

Someone calls my alias. I suffer what could very well be an arrhythmia as I turn to see Will walking towards me. I am simultaneously terrified and deeply relieved, causing a rush of adrenaline to flood my system in a primordial reflex.

It is not Will. It is his replacement.

Antony Dimmond, Roman's former teaching assistant. He knows I am not Roman Fell. Worse, he is the lackluster physical replacement for Will that I availed myself use of in Paris. He is delighted to have discovered me, and clearly interested in seeing me again, our sexual encounter no doubt providing him with some fufilment. I am sure to mention Bedelia when I invite him to dinner to ensure his discretion.

I serve the former curator's upper arm and shoulder, roasted with special attention paid to the juices, carved away from the bone, of course. Bedelia has oysters, fire-roasted acorns, and marsala. I am charmed when Antony tells her that her plate holds the exact foodstuffs the ancient Romans used to feed animals to improve their flavor. So much for her optimism.

Bedelia counters quickly, and I am similarly charmed by her response. "My husband has a very sophisticated palate. He's very particular about how I taste."

Antony smiles with a curve of wonder, disbelieving his luck, perhaps. "Is it that kind of party?"

I am exceptionally amused. I had not anticipated this, and waiting to see what will happen is delightful. I turn to Bedelia. If she accepts, she may at last receive what she has been trying to capture since we left Baltimore.

She gives me a withering look of disapproval, an expression she wears often these days.

“It’s not that kind of party,” I say, with no small amount of regret.

“No, it… really isn’t,” Bedelia can’t help but mutter into her drink.

“Shame. You were both suddenly so fascinating.”

I don’t find you that interesting.

You will.

Intrusive thoughts of Will bedevil me until Antony takes his leave. In an attempt to drive them away, I am remorselessly reckless. I invite Antony to my lecture on Friday, where he will immediately face the truth that I am posing as his former adviser. I am desperate for a distraction from my fantasies and memories and unapologetically flirt with chaos and ruin.

“You let him go,” Bedelia murmurs incredulously.

“What would you have me do, Bedelia?” She is becoming a scold, nearly as obnoxious as Alana Bloom. I picture myself drowning her in our brass bathtub.

Later, in bed, she takes my hand and places it over her silk-clad breast. I let my fingers linger in an appreciative touch, paying homage to her aesthetics, but then turn away on the pillow.

She sits up, silhouetted in the soft light of the piazza that permeates the filmy curtains. “Mr. Dimmond is *not* Will Graham,” she says, purely, I surmise, out of spite.

I close my eyes and pretend to sleep.

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“Betrayal, hanging, self-destruction. I make my own home in these gallows.”

Antony arrives late. Rude, but he has taken care with his appearance, no doubt planning his seduction. I remember Will standing in the waiting room of my Baltimore office, wearing the clothes I selected for him, smelling of Dior and pheromones.

That had been nothing more than a beautiful snare I eagerly placed around my own neck. I have no doubt that Antony poses the same danger.

Bedelia senses it as well, and decides to abandon me. It will take her time to pack, and I am too brash tonight to care if she slips away or not.

Antony approaches me as Professor Sogliato expresses his lukewarm congratulations. “The Studiolo was satisfied.”

“Satisfied?” Antony raises his brows in an expression of playful incredulity. “I thought the applause was downright enthusiastic in its soft and dusty way.”

I embrace the thrill of not knowing what will happen next, my curiosity burning all else away.

Antony does not disappoint. He gallantly plays along with my charade, introducing himself as my former TA, though he is sure to embed his barbs in me. “The tales I could tell,” he tempts Professor Sogliato, his words double-edged.

“Please do,” Sogliato requests, parrying with his rudeness.

“What kind of friend would I be?” Antony smiles at me, knowing full well, I suspect, how pretty it looks.

“What kind of friend indeed?” Sogliato is as insufferable as he is observant. He has picked up the thread of sexual connection between Antony and myself, rivaling Will in his ability to read others, though I’m sure his empathy is practiced only to discern weaknesses to use for his own advantage in turn. He is a pig of a very poor temperament and I look forward to killing him. It will be worth it to see the surprise on his face.

As the room clears, I invite Antony to see the collection. I am curious about what will happen here. There are many possible outcomes.

Soon, we are alone amongst the historical artifacts of anguish. If Will were here, he might tell me that he can feel the centuries of pain embedded in the atoms of these devices. I have no doubt he is sensitive to such vibrations, if they exist. I myself feel nothing, but that is to be expected.

“An exposition of atrocious torture instruments appeals to connoisseurs of the very worst in mankind,” Antony says, admiring some of the pieces in the display cases.

“Now that ceaseless exposure has calloused us to the lewd and the vulgar, it is instructive to see what still seems wicked to us.” I follow him as he inspects the rack and the wheel. I think of my repeated fantasies of applying these devices to a sexual encounter with Will, and I wonder if I can recreate them sufficiently using this body instead, never mind that I am again chasing something I will never have.

“What still slaps the clammy flab of our submissive consciousness hard enough to get our attention?”

I am suddenly very sure that Antony would let me indulge in my desires. Or perhaps he would go so far as to trade places with me, as Will sometimes delighted in doing. These thoughts of my own submission bring a sudden rush of blood to my genitals that I am unable to control. I successfully keep the desire out of my voice. “What wickedness has your attention, Mr. Dimmond?”

“Yours, ‘Dr. Fell’. I have no delusions about morality. If I did, I would have gone to *la polizia* . I’m curious as to what fate befell Dr. Fell to see you here in his stead.”

It seems impossible that he would come to me ready-made like this, completely prepared to step away from antiquated notions of good and evil. It took me time and effort to edge Will away from them, and even so, I was never fully able to influence him to release his hold. That much was evident the night I killed our daughter.

I wonder what it would take to make Antony Dimmond a murderer.

“You may have to strap me to the wheel to loosen my tongue,” I say, deliberately planting the image in his mind.

“You overestimate my affection for the genuine Dr. Fell. Clearly you found him as distasteful as I did.”

“On the contrary.” I cannot deny myself the opportunity to play with words.

“We can twist ourselves into all manner of uncomfortable positions just to maintain appearances, with or without a breaking wheel.”

“Are you here to twist me into an uncomfortable position?” I let my eyes eat him first.

“I’m here to help you untwist to our mutual benefit.”

He promises to lend credence to the identity I’ve crafted. His affirmation of who I am will strengthen my façade. I admit I see the benefit of his character reference, much like I saw the benefit of Alana Bloom’s when Will was making his accusations. By the time he has proven his potential use, we have seen the collection and are back at my work station.

“You mentioned mutual benefit,” I remind him as he deliberately positions himself so that I am edged up against the table. “What would you ask in return?”

Antony’s tongue, glistening in the soft light, touches his lower lip and his eyes shimmer with a hint of mischief. “Ever since I was a lad, I’ve wanted to spend another Italian summer locked in a passionate affair with a devilishly handsome older gentleman.”

He presses forward, trapping my hips against the side of the table with his own, and kisses me, a hand on the side of my face. I let myself touch him, folding my grip against his buttocks and the small of his back. The way I used to hold Will.

“An easy concession,” I say, and it is. “Is that all?”

“Well, room and board would certainly help. Poetry is, unfortunately, not a particularly lucrative line of work.”

“You would like to be kept.” I would gladly keep him. Surely there is a vacancy in a nearby flat.

“I’d be amenable to that sort of agreement,” he confirms, letting me go.

I imagine many Florentine nights where I make him drink whiskey before he kisses me.

“Come home with me,” I suggest, letting my fingers trail over his face, my mind conjuring Will’s as I feel his stubble. “We can iron out the details.”

“And… discuss our agreement with Mrs. Fell?”

“She might be persuaded to contribute to our arrangement,” I suggest as we descend the stairs and emerge out into the cool, damp evening, the wet air bringing the scent of ancient structures to us, a smell I have always particularly loved.

“Think she’ll be amenable?”

“It won’t take much convincing.” Bedelia has, after all, made her intentions clear on several occasions. Whether or not she imagined a third party could be inconsequential depending on her greed.

I have him wait outside as I slip into a small corner market not far from our flat. He may presume I am purchasing condoms. I do, and a small bottle of whiskey I can slip into my coat pocket. Anticipation floods my brain with dopamine and norepinephrine. These chemicals make one feel giddy, euphoric, and can decrease hunger. Antony will satisfy me. He will help me keep the peace. I am pleased.

I open the door to the flat. Bedelia is there, in her coat, purse and suitcase in hand, moments from flight. Antony is so focused on me he does not seem to notice, or if he does, presumes that she is leaving me on his account. I close the door behind us.

When I look back at Bedelia, my amygdala does something I cannot reconcile. Initially, my brain perceives her as a threat stimulus. This is nonsensical because she in no way physically intimidates me, and holds no weapon. My hippocampus and prefrontal cortex struggle to interpret my fear response, to rationalize it somehow, put it in context. Her expression brings a physical response to my fear; I am suddenly hyperalert, glucose flooding my muscles. My breathing intensifies, and though my heart rate only suffers a minor increase, this in and of itself is terrifying. My heart is always steady, even as I kill.

In fact, the only person in recent memory with the power to increase my heart rate is Will Graham.

That is where Bedelia has become a terror. She looks at Antony, looks at me, and I am suddenly bathed in an understanding I had not previously grasped.

As I told her the night I washed Will Graham’s blood from my body in her shower, Bedelia was a very good therapist, always showing me little things about myself I had not considered, though she was loath to give herself credit for her abilities.

The truth she reveals now, communicated to me silently through the look on her face, is what is saturating my body with adrenaline, catecholamine hormones preparing my muscles for violent action.

Before this moment I had convinced myself that while I had stepped up to the precipice, looked down at the gaping valley below, and considered falling into it, I was still in control. I

had consciously decided to back away, disappointed by Will's betrayal and his resistance to his full becoming. A becoming, I felt, was all I truly wanted for him. The rest of it was, ultimately, part of his chrysalis. Our affair was a tool for my use in crafting what I wanted him to become. I considered it a close call, a brush with love best left alone, and that one day it would fade, and I would persist in my existence.

I did not love Will because I was not capable of it. I let him love me because it was what was best for his transformation.

That is what I had convinced myself was true. My ability to lie to my own mind astonishes me at this moment, and I know my pupils have dilated as my body prepares to fight, freeze, or flee. The light changes.

I change.

I have changed.

Will changed *me* .

I had never truly loved another human being beyond the fondness a lamb farmer feels for the sweet things he must ultimately slaughter.

But I loved Will Graham.

He loved me.

And I still love him.

And it will never stop.

I turn and look at Antony now and I see him for what he is, or rather, what I have tried to make him. A physical embodiment of my *imago* of Will. An abject, shabby replacement for the one I will always desire above all else.

I should have known. My love for Will has compromised my decision-making, forcing me to act rashly in the past. I thought by imprisoning him I would release myself from the prison his love created for me. But I couldn't bear his absence and I freed him. I let my love blind me to his plans to hand me over to Jack's justice. When I became certain of his betrayal, I kept up the charade, hoping that in the final moment he would choose me instead.

We were supposed to leave, Will and I, and our daughter. We were supposed to make a home, and I have yet, during these months, to let myself mourn what was taken from me.

And here, now, I acknowledge that Will Graham has, and always will have, a true and everlasting power over me, and propping up this contemptible look-alike will not change that.

I pick up a small bust of Marcus Junius Brutus and bash it into the back of Mr. Dimmond's skull. I think it only appropriate that Brutus be given a chance to betray Antony this time. Friends, Romans, countrymen, there is blood in his ears. *Et tu* , lover? Gasping, he crawls

across the floor, likely praying to a god that doesn't care in a pathetic attempt to reach the doors.

I am in a place of perfect self-knowledge.

I do not want Bedelia to leave, for then I am truly alone. Besides, I need her counsel, since apparently I am very skilled at obfuscating vast portions of myself *from* myself. So I threaten her, frame her in her own mind as my accomplice.

" *Are you* in this very moment observing or participating? You say you are observing, but this is participation, Bedelia."

I break Antony Dimmond's neck to decapitate him internally.

I hang up her coat. That night, I let her hold me instead.

I drain the blood into Bedelia's brass bathtub before partially dismembering the corpse. Then, I pack it into a steamer trunk, and book a train ticket to Palermo.

... and CUT!

Holy shit. Hannibal takes Dimmond's body to the chapel in Palermo he once described to Will as part of his memory palace. There, he folds the remains into the shape of a heart, sending his love to Will with this brutal valentine. That ends episode 1. And to be honest, I have no idea what just happened to this fic. I guess we'll find out!

...stay tuned!

Season 3 Episode 2: Primavera

Chapter Summary

Hannibal arrives in Palermo with Antony Dimmond's remains to craft into Will's valentine. But Will is already in Palermo, having arrived several days earlier. Can Hannibal do his work and leave without a visit?

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “You’ve Haunted Me All My Life” — Death Cab for Cutie, from their album Kintsugi

“You've haunted me all my life
Through endless days and countless nights
There was a storm when I was just a kid
Stripped the last code of innocence
You've haunted me all my life
You're always out of reach when I'm in pursuit
Long winded then suddenly mute
And there's a flaw in my heart's design
For I keep trying to make you mine
You've haunted me all my life
You've haunted me all my life
You are the mistress I can't make a wife
And you've haunted me all my life
And so I wait but I never seem to learn
How to capture your diminishing returns
I still see you through the eyes of a child
Not even thinking we could tame the wild”

Palermo is a city of bloodshed, conquered time and again, each force leaving its mark on the architecture, its fingerprints smeared in culture. The Normans managed to claim it, though they’d never attempted the conquest of a city so populous, with walls so high. They could not breach these defenses, so, like all good creatures, they adapted. Necessity and ambition copulated, and gave birth to invention; they built towering staircases and deadly war machines. They were victorious.

I will have to be just as clever and persistent when I see Will again. I believed I had already conquered and occupied him, that he eventually opened the gates and let me walk through because he loved me enough to shuffle loose the moral coil. Now I realize those open doors were a trap. This time, I am prepared for a siege.

The train station is very close to the Capella Palatina and its accompanying palace, and there are many lodgings to choose from. I purchase a porter's two-wheeled cart after I agree to help him unload cases of bottled water for a nearby shop. His name is Guglielmo, and he has very few teeth but a kind of simple elegance about him. I tell him I am in town to visit my own Guglielmo, a close friend, and I need his cart to help me transport a large gift I have brought him. It only occurs to me then that Will's name in Italian contains the English word 'lie.' I find this appropriate. I would normally be amused by such linguistic play, but this one produces no such response.

The mistress of the boutique hotel agrees to let me leave the trunk in the attached restaurant's walk-in cooler. She thinks the locked luggage is full of rare books that must be kept in a cool and dry environment. What remains of Dimmond is not rare – he was, in fact, common enough, though in my fugue I saw rare qualities in him I associated with Will. But I will transform him into something no one on this earth has ever seen. It is the kind of gift Will deserves, since he is just as extraordinary. Extraordinarily beautiful, extraordinarily cruel. Extraordinary in that I love him though until now I thought I was incapable.

For what is love? Millions of years of evolution and the chemistry of the brain. For something that has for so long fascinated the minds and pens of poets, it is scientifically simple. We have an inborn desire to engage in reproductive action. Our early ancestors survived by coalition, making socialization necessary for survival. The chemicals released in the brain reduce stress and guard our bodies against disease, supporting a longer life. God made us this way; how else would he cover the earth with teeming billions? I believe it entertains him to see us fight over diminishing resources. He is curious what we will do in the face of annihilation. What we, and God by extension, are capable of. For what are we but his grand experiment, made in his image and set upon the earth?

What was it Will said? Wind us up and watch us go.

The hotelier must often deal with tourists, mostly Americans. My manners provide her relief as though I had administered balm to a wound. She surprises me by inviting me to lunch – her mother is visiting from a remote village and is making caponata with fresh aubergines, and *sarde a beccafico.* This invitation is unexpected and very welcome, as I have not been able to eat since killing Antony Dimmond. God's grand experiment does not only produce horror and ugliness, and I am in need of a reminder of this.

The hotelier, Signorina Onofria, takes me back past the front desk to her private quarters where her aged mother greets us. I help her stuff the sardines with pine nuts, raisins, and breadcrumbs. We arrange them in the baking dish with bay leaves. The old woman gently mocks my Italian. It is one of the best meals I've ever had that I did not make myself.

I take my leave after many thanks. Their generosity has taken the edge off my hunger, which allows me to think more clearly. This is a blessing, as I need to solidify my plans for Will's gift, which requires reconnaissance. I walk the short distance to the Norman Palace and allow

myself a few extra moments to enjoy the city and the people, its sights and smells. I smile at a girl walking a pristine white Bolognese.

I pass through the palazzo gardens and turn my attention to the three arches that signify the entrance to the capella.

Through the spray of a nearby fountain, I see him.

I see Will.

He is paying a boy one Euro for a bottle of water, pausing to twist the plastic lid and bring it to his lips.

The sudden arrhythmia returns and I sense disaster in my chest. I do not trust my eyes, but still I angle the larger tier of the fountain between us in case he looks this way. I picture him constantly, I see him in my mind's eye everywhere I go – ergo, this must be a conjuration of my mental state coupled with weariness from a long train ride.

I won't be fooled again. I will not let another Antony Dimmond distract me. I have no use for stand-ins, imposters, cheap reproductions. I experience anger and shame simultaneously, and it activates a desperate agitation in my brain that increases my blood pressure. This reaction slows down my digestive system, and the food trapped there sits heavily in my stomach.

It looks so much like Will. This man dresses like Will used to, before I released him from the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane; jeans, rumpled plaid shirt, baggy overcoat with far too many pockets to ever be of real use, tortoise-shell glasses, blunt footwear. But the likeness is incredible – his hair curls just so, his stubble following an identically unique jawline. Even the way he walks, shoulder burdened by a well-worn leather satchel, and the utilitarian watch strapped to his wrist is a direct copy.

The resemblance is uncanny, and the uncanny tends to elicit both fear and fascination in the human mind. I am no exception.

My breathing becomes more rapid and the world seems suddenly very sharp and bright as he walks closer and closer, clearly headed for the capella entrance. It is only when he stops to ask the girl if he can pet her dog that I am certain.

It *is* Will.

Not a hallucination, not manufactured by my mind, not a clever reproduction.

He is here.

Will came to Palermo *before* I called out for him. He has come of his own volition, remembering our discussion of the capella and the foyer of my mind palace. He is here searching for me. I am drowned in a sudden cascade of feeling. I am unmoored from my emotional numbness of the last eight months. I am freed from confusion. Will is here. Will came for me.

Beloved , I let myself think. *My treasure.*

Will.

Will, who betrayed me.

Will, who lied.

Will, who refused my gift.

Will, who would take my freedom from me.

Will, whose decisions took Abigail from us.

My first instinct is to hope he is here to reconcile, but other intelligences come to my rescue before I run to him for a long-awaited embrace. He is here to find me, that much is certain. What he will do when he does is not. He may not know what he will do. He has shown drastic hesitation before.

I am uncertain about my own future actions.

Will gets to his feet after petting the dog, and offers the girl a smile, but no eye contact. He puts his water in his satchel and walks beneath the middle arch and into the chapel.

I sink onto the edge of the fountain, physically weakened by his proximity. Racing thoughts compete with one another. My intellect eventually reawakens and I take steps to subdue my reaction – deep breathing, grounding techniques, focusing on the sound of the fountain until I feel my wits return.

I blend in with a large Danish tour group and get access to the nearby palace. Slipping away, I am able to find an area under renovation that provides access to the upper sections of the capella via scaffolding. It is the heat of the day, and the men are not at work; they will return in the evening, I suspect, when the sun is lower in the sky. The scaffolding extends to the ground, and there is a rudimentary pulley system to lift materials to the upper storeys. This will be useful for me in the dark hours. Now, I climb quickly, staying hidden as best I can behind sheets of plastic, and find myself in a secured, dusty balcony overlooking the capella's sanctuary through a screen of Arab design.

Will is seated in one of the folding chairs below, in an intermediate row. He is alone on his side of the aisle; the black-clad grandmothers are interspersed but keep their distance. The priest, his cassock brushing the elaborate flooring, moves from one side of the chapel to the other, stepping briefly on the skull image embedded in the floor. I shiver and think of the English phrase: *I feel as if someone has walked over my grave.* The adage suggests that when another person sets foot on the plot of ground where one will be entombed, one can sense their presence. The living person interacts with the physical space where one's remains will someday reside, creating a kind of dread, a sudden brush with mortality. A meeting of the physical and the spiritual that goes against nature.

I do not feel dread. Mortality reminds me that I am alive, and free to enjoy the world's pleasures and horrors.

The difference now, I think, is that I want to enjoy them with Will.

Will has removed his satchel from his shoulder and tucked it under the seat. Another man might have placed it on the seat beside himself for easier access, but Will does not presume to take up more space than he needs. I take advantage of my position to stare at him unabashedly, drinking in the whole of him after these long months. I will never tire of his profile. I cannot fathom another in existence that I cherish more, especially when he looks up at the mosaics and flat, placid faces of the saints.

The tour group I used for cover steps into the chapel, speaking in hushed tones. The guide begins to describe the Byzantine, Norman, and Fatimid architectural influences. As soon as he hears them enter, Will turns in his chair and scans the crowd, his face open, alert, and sweetly hopeful. It falls in an expression of visible disappointment after a few moments, and he turns back to the mosaics.

I smile. He was looking for me. I did not think such a thing was possible, but the capella is a hundred times more beautiful, elevated by Will's evident hope to see me, filled with a sacred light that shimmers mellow gold over the mosaics, blending with the flickering prayer candles. If I never see him again, I will remember this moment, the way he craned his graceful neck to search me out among strangers.

It is this way each time anyone steps through the door.

Will sits this way for *hours* . Never once does he look at his watch. Occasionally he stands, and hangs his coat over the back of the chair to walk from one end of the chapel to the other. He stares at the image of death, though he never lets his feet touch it. He wanders from candelabra to candelabra, looking at the small red glass votives as if trying to discern the meaning of each prayer. Sometimes, he mutters to himself, inclining his head as if he is whispering to someone sitting beside him. That is how I know he is not praying.

The priest speaks with him intermittently in a mixture of slow Italian and English. He is trying to discern why Will is here. He offers spiritual comfort, directions to other sights in Palermo worth seeing, the address of a homeless shelter. Every time, Will says he is praying and offers no further explanation for his vigil. It makes the Father nervous. Will disrupts this place with his mere presence. Because he is waiting for me.

At one point, the priest and a nun pass directly beneath the balcony where I keep watch, speaking soft, rapid Italian with Sicilian accents.

"What does he want?" she asks.

"He says he is here to pray," the priest replies, inclining his head for privacy.

"But it's been three days. Has he come to mass?"

The priest shakes his head. "He watches everyone who comes in, and then leaves. Returns when it is over."

"Communion?"

The priest shakes his head again.

I smile. My Will would not give them the satisfaction. He owes God nothing; certainly these humble servants deserve no explanations.

There is a very quiet moment in the chapel, almost a supernatural event, where no one is speaking or moving, the confessional vacant, the old women somehow simultaneously silent, where Will's voice floats up to me. I hear him say, "It's like you said, Abigail. If everything that can happen happens, then you can never really do the wrong thing. You're just doing what you're supposed to."

I weep. My tears are inaudible, but they flow in rich veins down my face and I make no move to wipe them away. He is speaking to our daughter. He has made a place for her in his mind, a memory person instead of a memory palace. That is how he will honor every part of her. I doubt he was able to attend her funeral, to watch her be lowered into the earth next to her mother. I wonder if Garret Jacob Hobbs also resides in the family plot or if he was disposed of in a way that was meant to erase him. If so, it would be a pity. That man did so much for Will, and he tried so very hard not to kill his daughter. Without him, I would not be here now, my vision of my beloved blurred through my tears, surrounded by a halo of Byzantine beauty.

The lower part of me hopes desperately that Will came to Palermo to beg for a place at my side. That when he lays eyes on me he will fall to his knees.

My elevated self would be proud indeed if he came here to try to kill me.

Either way, it will be interesting.

And intimate.

Evening comes. The capella closes early, before the dinner hour, and there will be no more admissions. A young woman sweeps the floor. There are no more tourists. The women in black leave in pairs, gnarled arms linked together. Will stubbornly remains in his seat until the girl with the broom approaches him hesitantly and says she is very sorry, but the entire heritage site is closing for the evening and he must be on his way.

Will was prepared for this. He nods and stands to put on his jacket. I move as quickly as I can on legs numb from hours of standing, escaping back through the hallway to the area undergoing renovation, and make my way down the scaffolding. On my way out, I steal a yellow reflective vest I find hanging on a fence post and fold it into a pocket of my coat. I am just in time to see Will exit the chapel and wander out into the city. I follow.

Will walks. He walks for several hours, head down, shoulders hunched. His route is like a flower, and he traverses the petals only to return to the golden center, the Capella Palatina. He stops only when an old man asks him for a cigarette. Will apologizes for not having one, but donates five Euro to the cause. The city darkens around us. I am exhausted, but I keep the back of Will's head in sight. I consider that he may know he's being followed, but the way he keeps returning to the palace complex, never once looking over his shoulder, disperses that notion quickly.

At last, he wanders up to a short-order restaurant catering to tourists and re-emerges with a sandwich, which he eats on a bench like a heathen. It is not the first time he's had his dinner in this exact spot, because the stray dogs know to find him here at this time of day. He has purchased a second sandwich to feed them, and offers morsels to each in turn.

Will returns to the capella one last time as darkness falls. He circles the entire building complex, then walks a few more blocks to a cheap hostel. I climb a small fence that deposits me in the inner courtyard of the old building. I am guided as though I am a lodestone and Will is cold iron, drawn to him by an invisible but utterly natural force. I see him opening his small window to let in the cool night breeze. I immediately go to the front desk and request a room on the same floor with a courtyard view. They are booked, but there is one on the fourth floor I could have. I am pleased; as soon as I walk in and go to the window I catch sight of Will in his room. He has not drawn the curtains. I suspect it is because he is preoccupied, but part of me harbors a secret hope that he knows I might be watching, and doesn't want to spoil my view.

This notion lingers as he removes his clothing, wrapping a towel around his waist. He carefully folds his glasses into their case, and brushes his teeth at the small metal sink without looking at himself in the mirror. The voyeurism I enjoy is invasive and exciting. I catch but a few glimpses of the newest scar, the one I gave him, the long slit along his belly above the navel. I long to gaze at it uninterrupted, to touch it, taste its flavor and texture. Gauge its capacity as a lifelong reminder of my power. I chose to gut him, a physical manifestation of what I felt in that moment, an anguish indescribable. But I did not want him to die, and he did not die.

He did not *want* to die. He fought to live, no doubt trying to save our daughter one last time. Perhaps, I let myself consider, he fought to live to see me again, to bring me either his violence or his love or both.

When Will emerges from the shower, I can only imagine the way he must feel and smell, fresh and damp, skin warmed by water. It takes on a different hue, gently flushed like a cherub in a fresco. When his hair is wet, it is an absolute black. I have never wanted to touch anything, much less another human being, more than I want to touch Will at this moment.

He hangs up the towel, treating me to a back view, brief but lovely, before pulling on an undergarment. He turns out the lights and gets into bed. I can just barely see him from this angle, but he does something with his phone, and plugs in a pair of headphones, positioning them carefully before reclining and pulling up the hostel's cheap sheet and undoubtedly scratchy blanket. Just when I think he must be asleep he gets up and takes several drinks from the bottle of whiskey he's stashed under the bed.

My body aches from sitting still so long, having stood all afternoon at the chapel.

No. There is some slight muscle fatigue, but the ache is a symptom of something else. Of being so near him but unable to embrace.

Now he sleeps. I know because I have watched him sleep, memorized the expressions of slumber. I am too far away to see if he dreams.

I reluctantly take my leave. I have work to do.

Returning to Signorina Onofria's hotel, I open my luggage. I stare at the swords, test the edge of my knives. Yet even as I prepare to elevate Mr. Dimmond, I cannot prevent images of Will asleep in his hostel room from invading my mind. They are obstructing my design.

I begin a new design. Why give Will my broken heart when he can become it?

I muse as I load my coat pockets with a different array of items, supplies for live prey. I am curious what will happen if I break into Will's room tonight. I am prepared now for several outcomes.

What the patrons of this particular youth hostel do not know is that there is one key that opens all of the rooms, the owners cutting corners. It is simple enough to steal a key from an inebriated university student smoking out front and get inside. I stalk the concrete hallways until I find Will's room and ease the key into the lock.

There he is. I close the door softly behind myself and wait until I can control my breathing and heart rate, not something that typically takes conscious effort. Will overwhelms my physiology. I breathe deeply through my nose, catching his scent. He doesn't wear the aftershave I gave him, or the ship on the bottle. He smells like cheap hotel soap and indecision. Also whiskey, which I have come to associate closely with him, as evidenced by my dalliance with Dimmond.

As I creep nearer, I am blessed by the underlying perfume of his living body, the basis of his biochemical existence, and it tears into me like I imagine my knife tore into Will's abdominal cavity, quick and clean, no pain until there was nothing but pain.

He sleeps deeply. I can see his eyes moving beneath his lids, and I gift myself an uninterrupted look at his face, relaxed and guileless, black lashes and brows so stark against his luminous pale skin, made more so by the cold light coming from the courtyard.

Will is on his back, one arm resting over the place where I gutted him as if in sleep he wishes to protect it. His other arm is bent, the hand resting on the mattress near the corner. His phone is on his chest, the screen dark but facing upward, and the white cords of the headphones cut lines in the dark to his ears.

I slip off my shoes at the door and make a soundless approach. Leaning over, I touch the pad of my finger to the phone's home button. It lights up and shows me the name of the song that is playing. I smile, a reflex of sweet disbelief. It is "Liebestod" from *Tristan and Isolde* . The last time I heard it was with Will at the opera showcase. After the last note I asked him what he thought. His response was to request a kiss.

We shared that moment, heard the plaintive wail of a lost love set to music, and still, he betrayed me.

I pull several zip ties out of my coat. I affix the first two to the posts on the bed, leaving enough slack to slide others in, creating makeshift handcuffs. I position the second set carefully. Before I touch Will, I examine the pills I find on his bedside table. Sleep aids and

mood stabilizers. That, coupled with the whiskey, increases my odds. I slide my hand under his pillow, mere centimetres at a time, feeling for a weapon. He seems to be entirely unarmed, except for the multi-tool on the nightstand, which has a knife attachment. It is folded up and out of reach.

Holding my breath, at last, I touch him, lifting the arm he rests next to the pillow. I guide it back with aching slowness until it is close enough to secure the zip tie. I tighten it as much as I can without running the risk of waking him. I repeat my action with the other arm, a more difficult feat, as I have to lift his limb away from his midsection. I do not see the scar yet; he has the blankets up too high. But the skin on the undersides of his wrists is as smooth and white as oleander, as lovely and poisonous, and my touch lingers longer than necessary. Still, he does not wake, nor does he feign sleep. I am certain I could tell.

I prepare myself for the final onslaught, slipping off my coat and laying it within reach on the edge of the bed. I remove the blindfold from my inner pocket and take one deep breath, flooding my body with oxygen. I have not yet decided what I will do.

Are you here to kiss, or kill?

I have prepared for both.

I am able to slide the blindfold over his head in a quick but gentle movement. When it brushes his face, he tries to lift his hand to his cheek, but finds he cannot. He wakes in a confusion, pulling on the zip ties that have his wrists trapped to the bedposts. Just as he sucks in air to speak or shout, I shove the black leather gag against his mouth, holding it fast with one hand while strapping it tightly with the other. He thrashes with his legs, but then I am on top of him, sitting on his hips. He struggles off and on for a minute before he ceases movement, blind and dumb and deaf to everything except the opera that continues to play through his headphones.

He is breathing rapidly, and perspiration glistens on his brow and on his chest. The activity has only increased the power of his scent and I am reeling with it, as though it were some kind of intoxicant. Unable to stop myself, I arch over him, hands on the cheap mattress, and bring my nose to his throat for a deep inhale. I am close enough to hear the music in his ears – *La Traviata* .

Will.

His body beneath me, his heart so close, his beauty arrested and all mine.

I know now why I am here, and it is not to kill him. But what I want depends on what he wants. I can feel his body responding to me, but I crave surety. It is fulfilling to one's ego to be wanted in return.

I gently remove the headphones from his ears and put them aside with the phone. Then I put my lips to his ear. "Quiet, Will."

His name, leaving my mouth, traveling through the aether to his ear has a spellbinding effect on both of us. I fall further in love with him. His muscles relax entirely, despite the danger I

surely pose, and he lifts his chin to nod in assent. I slowly remove the gag and enjoy revealing his mouth in tiny increments, finding it a perfect match to the one in my memory. Whether drawn back in a snarl, sweetly open and inviting, or curved into a self-conscious half-smile, his lips are petals that adorn a changeable flower that leans toward the sun. Towards me, as though I grant him life-giving light.

I see the faintest smile now, just a flicker, as if he can't help himself. He follows my instructions and does not make a sound.

I bend over him even more closely. My hand quakes as I bring my fingers at long last to the side of his face, tracing them back into his rich, dark curls. Their texture is unchanged, silky as ever. I notice two or three silver hairs near his temple that were not there in Baltimore. It feels significant, though I am well aware that hair color does not change due to stress events or experiencing powerful fear. The science cannot override my heart just now.

I brush my mouth against his, feather-light, not even a kiss, only to let him know it is there. And I wait.

I am not made to wait long.

Will curves his neck and seeks me out. He finds my lips and kisses me ravenously, pressing into the mattress with his elbows to achieve the leverage he wants.

If the world were to end now, perhaps by way of a comet, or some kind of meltdown in the core, the magnetic poles suddenly switching and casting us all into space, I would happily ride into my doom with this kiss. He tastes like home. His ardent tongue is my joy. Eight months of suffering blaze away.

For some time I am lost in the exquisite chaos of our reunion.

But in time I am returned to earth.

Will betrayed me. He lied and he forced my hand, knife in my grip, to slice open Abigail's throat. Abigail who trusted me to care for her. Abigail who willingly came into my arms when I beckoned, likely knowing what I intended to do. To finish what Garret Jacob Hobbs began.

It could have been like *this* every night of our lives if we'd left together. But that was not what Will had wanted, at least not entirely.

I back away from Will. He strains against the zip ties, even as they cut mercilessly into his wrists, pushing himself up to try and find me again.

I can't bear to look him in the eye. If I see his eyes I will be powerless. I will burn everything down.

I will not make it so easy for him.

The blindfold stays on. And I gently reapply the gag. He lets me, silent still, and I stroke his hair affectionately to let him know I am pleased.

There is something to be said for leaving him like this for the hotel staff to find. I could leave now. I have work to do.

I tense the muscles in my legs to slide off of him.

My body won't move. I feel anchored to this spot, anchored to Will. If I was once his paddle to navigate rough waters, he is my anchor. I feel the invisible but undeniably heavy chain that connects us.

Again, I consciously command my body to dismount and walk away. And again, to my abject horror, I am ignored. Instead, I lower myself to worship the flesh of his shoulder and neck, purposely drowning in his scent. If I were to fall into him and die, would Will commission statues of me, deify me in his grief as Hadrian did for Antinous?

I know I would, if our situations were reversed. Even if I was the one to hold his head beneath the water.

He tremors at the touch of my lips. He angles his chin back to give me more to kiss and I readily accept the invitation, putting my hands on him now, touching every inch I can find, treasuring his warmth. I have a fleeting thought of chastisement — I was a fool to think the dead man in the trunk could have ever been any kind of substitution for this. For him, for Will, *my* Will.

I have to have him. I cannot leave this room until I have given him pleasure and taken my own, felt the strength of that anchoring chain not as a weight but as a connection, each link forged in strife and fire. The power drawing me to him is all-consuming, and I meet it with mortal fear. But it will not be denied. I move my mouth down his throat, to the sweet hollow, pressing my tongue against it, a promise for what I will do to another hollow of his body. I keep my promise, but only after I have made the same vow to his nipples, each in turn, and migrate my kisses lower, pushing the sheets out of the way.

Will has the capability to deceive me with words, but not with his body. I am confident in this, more confident than I should be given his talent for deception. I am warned sharply by the memory of how we made love in the back of a prisoner transport mere days before he sent his proxy to kill me. Nearly succeeded. Will had been insatiable that night, believing it was our last, perhaps.

We have had many last nights. This could be one of them. In truth, they all were. God could have struck us down at any time. We are very deserving of his wrath. And yet here we are.

I feel possessed by my need to possess. I draw my tongue down to Will's body to my target, making detours along the way that harden him such that I wonder if he might spill with even this minute stimulation. The varied tastes of his anatomy bring the pleasure and ache of memory. Now I lick his inner thighs and he tenses, perhaps anticipating a mark. I deny him this out of spite and think of Aeschylus.

Does it mean nothing to you, the unblemished thighs I worshipped and the showers of kisses you had from me?

Will makes pleading, keening sounds in his throat. They sound exactly like I imagined they would when I fantasized about him on the wheel or the rack, though muffled by the gag.

I don't know where the desire comes from, why I would have such a notion, but I want him inside of me. It is similar to my sharp hunger, a need to consume him and have him within me. This is the way I wish to claim him, not by inserting myself inside of him to be held, cradled, but to bring him as close to me as possible.

I have prepared to kiss or kill, so within my jacket amid the knives is a package of lubricant. I strip myself from the waist down, and hurry myself through preparation, so anxious am I for this kind of connection. I tease him in the meantime with my tongue and slick fingers. The zip ties have chafed his wrists cruelly, but his proxy treated my flesh there with far less consideration.

At last, I take him in my hand and lower myself down. He can't see me; he doesn't know what I plan to do. When my entrance touches the tip he throws his head back and strains so hard against the zip ties that he bleeds on both sides. I go slowly, more to prolong his suffering than prevent my own. Then, at last, I come to rest against him. He is entirely contained, caged in my body and at my mercy in every way.

His chest rises and falls rapidly in anticipation. At last, I give him what he wants and begin to move, using only my own strength to drive him into me, intermittently bending forward to brace myself against his chest. I am tireless. I barely feel the strain, and I angle my pelvis just so to receive my full pleasure from him. The slightest touch to myself and I have left a warm trail of fluid over the scar on his abdomen.

I trace my finger along the tight pink skin where I split him open, revisiting with my finger where my blade has been. Will experiences what seems to be a significant orgasm, both in length of sensation and accompanying muscle contractions.

I cannot stifle the small sounds I make as I climb off of him. My legs feel weak and so does my sense of betrayal.

I clean myself at the small metal sink just enough to be able to re-dress. Will's breathing slows. He was splayed out, motionless in the aftermath, but now he is restless, still pulling at his bindings. "Don't speak," I whisper to him, and unclasp the gag. He parts his lips to breathe more deeply but follows my directive.

I kiss him once more, softly.

He came here to find me. I found him instead. And I will not make any of this easy on him.

I unfold the knife from his multi tool and place the handle on his hand. Given time, he will be able to cut himself loose.

"Catch me if you can,Will," I murmur against his ear. I give him one last lingering kiss, and leave. I have unfinished business at the Capella Palatina.

... and CUT!

Hannibal heads out from here to create his human body valentine out of Antony Dimmond!

Will walks into the crime scene the next day after this scene and is then taken to the police station for questioning, which is when he meets Rinaldo Pazzi.

... stay tuned!

Season 3 Episode 3: Secondo

Chapter Summary

Will finds the mysterious Chiyoh in the hunting lodge near Castle Lecter. She is the keeper of a prisoner who allegedly killed and ate Hannibal's sister Mischa. Will investigates Castle Lecter like it's a crime scene. Chiyoh allows him to sleep in the lodge and he has a strange dream inspired by their earlier conversation. "All sorrows can be borne if you put them in a story." Will's dream is a fairytale, but what kind of ending does it have?

Hannibal finds himself dreaming, normally something he can perfectly control. But this dream is different. What did Will do to his brain to create this connection?

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “Calling You Home (feat. RUNN)” – Seven Lions

“Feel the waves over my head
I'm in too deep
I'm fading fast, but running right back
Can't you see
All my heart can take
But for my mistakes
Scared that it's too late
So please
Don't say it's the end of the story
Don't say it's the end of the road
'Cause as long as you're there to hold me
I'll always be calling you home
Don't know what's waiting before me
Thank god I don't have to go it alone
'Cause as long as you're there to hold me
I'll always be calling you home
In the dark, I'm losing my way
I need your light
I know it's hard but baby don't fade
It's worth the fight”

“Why are you looking for him after he left you with a smile?” Chiyoh’s eyes were pools of black, reflecting tiny darts of light cast by the candles that illuminated the elegant but dilapidated drawing room of Castle Lecter’s hunting lodge.

Will wasn’t sure how to answer. How could he ever coalesce everything that Hannibal meant to him, how meeting him had brought Will the greatest sorrow and greatest happiness of his life, both elevated and ruined it? His inability to explain added a level of bitterness to the tea as he sipped it. He took a breath and opened his mouth, curious himself as to what would come out.

“I’ve never known myself as well as I know myself when I’m with him.”

It was true. Hannibal had uncovered things in Will like a dedicated archaeologist at a dig site, picking and cleaning with little brushes, or shoveling out bucket after bucket of useless rock and debris. He had found trauma perfectly preserved, like the villas encased in volcanic ash at Vesuvius, their frescoes still vibrant and luxurious. He had excavated Will’s darkest tunnels, where murder lived, where bloody justice lurked among the bones and broken pottery. And he had recovered treasures, strings of colorful beads, gold coins, gems freed from rotting velvet bags to once again receive the kisses of the sun and return it through multicolored facets thought lost to time. He had rescued Will’s capacity to love and be loved from the ruins and shown them to him. Every artifact, from the golden chalices to the bloodstained sacrificial daggers were priceless to Hannibal.

“You won’t find Hannibal here,” Chiyoh said, her voice velvet-colored steel. “There are places on these grounds he cannot safely go. Bad memories.”

Will studied her, deeply aware of her beauty and the threat she posed to him. “What do these grounds hold for you?”

“Hannibal wanted to kill that man for what he did to Mischa. I wouldn’t let him take his life. So Hannibal left his life with me.”

Will could almost hear Hannibal’s voice behind her words, though infused with the lilt of youth. *What would you have me do, Chiyoh? If I do not kill him, he cannot go free. Would you be responsible for his life for the rest of your own?*

“He was… curious if you would kill. I imagine he still is.”

Chiyoh nodded, lifting her cup to her lips again.

The silence began as palpable, then mellowed into a type of comfort. Will did not know this woman. So much about her seemed deeply unknowable. She was a cypher. But in one aspect they were joined forever, like siblings. Hannibal had placed each of them in a maze and sat back to analyze how they might escape it, all for his own amusement and curiosity.

She was steely, he thought. Stubborn in her insistence that no one had the right to end another’s life, no matter the atrocities committed. Those convictions had imprisoned her here

for decades, but she showed no signs of wavering. She kept the prisoner in squalor and ensured his penance. Chiyoh was loyal enough to Hannibal for that, but had otherwise resisted him, despite the incalculable cost. Formidable to be sure, and worthy of his respect.

She'd given her life, essentially, to protect Hannibal from the kind of thing Will did to Garret Jacob Hobbs. A righteous kill that led down a bloody path.

She was stronger than he was, Will realized as he marveled at her in the candlelight. By far.

"Chiyoh," he said softly. "What happened here? What happened to-to Hannibal, and what happened to Mischa?"

"That is not my story to tell," she said, folding her hands on the table where they knelt, sitting together in the Japanese fashion.

"Then tell me your story," Will requested, shifting off of his knees and adjusting his position, hoping for a lengthy tale.

Chiyoh studied him for what felt like a full minute. He waited out her silence.

"I was very young when I left Japan," she began, trapping him in her liquid obsidian gaze. "My family sent me to serve at an estate in France. They hoped I would learn, and I would marry well." The slightest smile tugged at the corner of her severe yet delicate mouth. "One day, Hannibal came."

She went quiet. Will felt the years passing through her with fluid grace, like dark water.

"What was he like?" Will asked.

"When he first came, he was thin and mute, with eyes like a doll. I cared for him. I was told that even though he was older, I had to protect him from any more harm the world might do, no matter the cost."

Now, Will fully understood why the man who murdered Mischa Lecter was still alive.

"We made him safe. I taught him origami. He taught me music. Little by little, he changed. He grew strong and began to speak. He became my friend. He would draw me pictures and cook me little meals."

Will pushed his clarifying questions aside. "How did you come to be here, then?"

Chiyoh finally dropped her gaze to her folded hands before looking back at Will. "When he came of age, Hannibal traveled for weeks at a time. I did not know where he went. One day, he asked me to go with him. Hannibal brought me here. Never to the castle, only to the lodge." She gestured elegantly to their surroundings. "After a few days, he left me here. He then returned with the prisoner you saw. Hannibal told me that after his parents had died, this man had killed and eaten up his sister Mischa. The man pleaded with me and said he did no such thing. Hannibal dragged him to the castle and made him kneel in the spot where he says Mischa died. He pulled out a knife. The man was hysterical. He… admitted he killed Mischa,

but denied that he ate her. Hannibal put the knife to his throat, but I stopped him. That is when Hannibal made us prisoners to one another."

"Was that the last time you saw him?"

Chiyoh shook her head, a small, definite motion. "He returned once more, to take Mischa out of her pauper's grave and bury her in the family plot. He brought with him a headstone."

"I saw it." Will pressed his lips together. "What is… *mylima* ?"

"It means 'beloved.'"

The lodge was silent, save for the spitting of a few candles and their breathing. Will let this intimate knowledge of Hannibal's past filter into his heart.

"Why bring you?" Will mused, his voice soft but enough to shatter the silence. "He must have known you'd stop him."

"Perhaps he did." Chiyoh lifted her cup and drained it. "Perhaps he did not want to face the man alone." She set the cup down, and Will saw the gloss of tears in her eyes. "I was his friend. Almost like a sister. Perhaps he wanted me to bear witness when he took his revenge." She looked Will squarely in the eye again. "There is no certainty when it comes to Hannibal. To love him is to accept that."

Will smiled, famine-thin. "You have no idea," he said, "how right you are."

They were quiet again, each revisiting the past.

"I do not think you will try to kill me," Chiyoh said at last, standing in a smooth motion. "So you may stay here if you wish. I sleep there." She nodded to a half open door nearby. "It will be locked until morning."

She gave him a lingering look that prompted Will to pose a question. "Do you… want my company? I ask because you've been alone for so long. I-I know how that feels."

Her face reflected no warmth whatsoever, but her voice was polite. "You are trying to be kind, I think." A pause.

Will got to his feet with a nod.

"You are Hannibal's *nakama,"* she added. "I would honor that."

Will nodded again and broke eye contact first, submitting to her formidable gaze.

Taking the shotgun with her, Chiyoh went into the bedroom and shut the door. Will heard the clank of the old lock.

Will gathered the tea things and returned them to the rudimentary kitchen where rabbits and pheasants hung from the ceiling along with bunches of dried herbs. He left the lodge and

stalked the grounds again for another hour or so, trying to dislodge the feeling in his heart that told him Hannibal was here.

In a sense, he was, echoes of him, the ghost of his sister, and the very living ghoul that had murdered her. Even if Hannibal was not physically present at Castle Lecter, his shadow filled its empty halls, slipped between the thick old-growth trees of the surrounding forest, and skimmed across the tall grasses of the empty fields.

Will paused to marvel again at the angel statue on top of the weed-choked fountain. It was hard to believe it had ever run clear, the water sparkling. The basin beneath was a swamp, like the ones he'd grown up in, teeming with life born of a primordial slime, what most of the world saw as decay and filth. To Will, it had always been an amniotic fluid from which so many organisms came and could live and thrive. He thought of Hannibal rising from the viscous water-mud at the bottom of the fountain, born from it, fed on it until he was strong enough to emerge, covered in snails and haloed by fireflies.

This place – the castle and the lodge, the surrounding grounds – had been Hannibal's chrysalis. Now Will stood in the remains, the ruins, the shards left over from the moment Hannibal had broken free and spread his wings. This place was only a carcass, the scattered leavings after Hannibal had eaten his fill and moved on to hunt larger game.

If Castle Lecter was a body, well, Will was an investigator.

Quite literally, it was a crime scene.

Interpret the evidence, Beverly whispered in his ear.

Will returned to the lodge and entered quietly. He'd seen a gas lantern near the door and took it along with a box of strike-anywhere matches. In a shed so old it leaned at an eighty degree angle, he found a shovel and a spade with a broken handle. All that was left to do was begin.

The Lecter family cemetery was ancient, its weathered stones like rotted teeth in the maw of the damp earth, their timeworn surfaces slick with moss and tangled with vines. Will lit the lantern and set it on an adjacent headstone, this one so old he could not read the name that had once been carved into it, and coaxed up the flame. As if the sky knew his errand, the cloud cover floated away, allowing the moon to aid him, along with the thousands of fireflies that floated dreamily through the shadowy woodlands.

He paused, shovel in hand, and watched a snail make its way across the surface of Mischa's marker, leaving a wet trail in its wake that glittered like a slice of intermittent gemstone in the lantern's dancing light. Will stared into the spiral of its shell and felt himself under the suddenly bared eye of the universe, beheld by the cosmos — the tiny creature an *imago* for the living galaxy, a totem of galactic significance. It felt holy, this place, this sacred ground he was about to disturb.

"Mischa," he said softly, leaning on the shovel like the gravedigger at work making a place for Ophelia. "I, uhm, I want to say a prayer, but I don't know who to say it to." The wind whispered softly through the trees, rustling the dry leaves. "Hannibal," he said. "I'm-I'm sorry. But I… need this. To understand."

Will took a shaky breath and bowed his head for a few moments in a kind of sacrilegious reverence. Then, he struck the dirt with the shovel.

***

He wasn't prepared for how small the coffin was. How small she was inside it.

Will gently set the pried-off lid to the side and stood. He raised his face to the moon, then looked at the ground, and finally at Castle Lecter's silhouette against the vivid expanse of stars.

" *God* ," he managed after a few long moments of trying to keep the tears at bay, unable to form any other word. He hurled the name of the deity at the twisted galaxies above, knowing it echoed into a cold, uninterested void.

He put his face in his gloved hand and wept.

All sorrows can be borne if you put them in a story.

All sorrows can be borne if you put them in a story. The voice in his mind that whispered the words to him again was a chorus, the voices of Chiyoh, Beverly, and Hannibal echoing together.

Will. Interpret the evidence.

His hands were shaking. Will made them into fists, then turned and forced himself to look, conjuring the ambient pulse in his mind for the first time since he'd lost Abigail. It swept over his vision as he knelt next to the skeletal remains of the child.

"O-once upon… a time," he murmured, running his sleeve over his face to chase the tears away. "Once upon a time, there was a castle. A-a little boy and a little girl lived there with their parents. But then, ah, their parents died, and the children were alone."

Will clicked on his flashlight and forced himself to look at the dessicated corpse. Aside from a few scraps of dried skin, a bit of hair, and the remains of a heartbreakingly small blue flowered dress, she was an array of bones, staring up at him with empty sockets that were somehow imploring and heartbroken. Gently, he lifted her skull. It came away easily in his hand. Turning it carefully, Will confirmed what he suspected based on the spiderweb of cracks he'd glimpsed.

"One day," he said, just above a whisper, "a bad man came. Her brother tried to protect her, but the bad man hurt her. She, ah…" He shone the light through the bottom of the skull, then back at the crown. "She probably fell and hit her head against something with an edge. A stone stair step, maybe. Maybe she was pushed. But, ah, it killed her."

Will replaced the skull with the greatest possible care. After a pause to simply breathe, trying to break up the thick carbon of grief that threatened his airway, he unbuttoned the dress. The threads holding the little pearl buttons disintegrated at his touch. He murmured an apology and pushed the garment open to shine his light at her abdomen and rib cage.

It took him some time, but eventually he spotted them. Knife marks on the interior walls of her ribs, a few deep enough to graze the spinal column. The haphazard scars of Hannibal's grief.

"The boy, he, uhm…" Will's throat had gone thick again as he held back his tears. "He thought he failed her. And he… couldn't let her be dead, n-not entirely. He wanted something of hers to live. He felt like her father. And n-no father should have to bury his child…"

Will lost control again. All he could do was sit next to the little headstone on the cold ground and stare furiously at the sky as he wept in bitter silence. *Abigail.*

He wiped his face again and forced his breaths to lengthen, deepen.

"He took the parts of her that made her alive. H-heart. Lungs. Liver. And he… ate them. He wanted her life to be safe inside of him, n-not rotting in some hole in the ground. He… can still feel her with him. She's still there. He carries part of her and he keeps that part safe, deep w-within him. Where nobody can hurt her."

Will got on his knees again, ignoring the damp earth soaking into his pant legs. He sniffed, wiped his eyes again, and forced himself to look at her one last time, carefully smoothing her dress and replacing everything as it had been.

That was when he noticed it. A small wooden box tucked behind the folds of the dress near the child's knee. He moved the fabric aside with shaking fingers and lifted it. The little golden clasp and hinges were tarnished with age, but the artifact seemed otherwise intact. Will thumbed the clasp and opened it.

Music filled the graveyard.

Betthoven's *Ode to Joy,* plinking from the music box in plaintive, innocent notes, degraded and slightly off key, but singing their existence nevertheless. Will watched the ceramic ballerina twirl, her dress in taffeta tatters, the backdrop of her stage a spotted mirror that reflected his eyes back at him, wet pools of bloodshot blue-green.

The velvet lining of the little box had moldered, but the moisture seemed to have spared the small piece of paper tucked within, yellowed but legible. It was a recipe card. Certain loops and whorls had changed, evolving over time, but the handwriting was unmistakably Hannibal's.

Coratella con Carciofi.

The recipe that followed was in Italian, but Will had learned a little bit during his stay, and could throw some high school Spanish and Cajun French at it.

The ingredients included purple artichokes, olive oil, salt.

Liver.

Lungs.

Heart.

Will instinctively pressed the card to his chest, over his own still-beating organ, embracing it for a moment in lieu of Hannibal, boy or man. Then he replaced it in the box, and replaced Mischa in her grave.

As he dug, he told her the rest of the story.

“The boy went to live with relatives, and he met a friend – a protector. He started learning. He wanted… he wanted to understand *why* this happened to you. And why he had done what he’d done. So he-he learned about the human body and the human mind, and about God and life on earth. And he realized he was different, so different from everybody else. Maybe he’d, ah, been born like that, but… this place, and you, and the man in the cage, it was all part of him, whether he wanted it to be or not.

“He tried to understand himself, because nobody else could. He could understand other people really well, too well, maybe. Understanding man, he thought – that’s understanding God, too. Horror and beauty, all of it.

“God let you die, Mischa. Horribly. He didn’t seem to care that you suffered, and that your brother suffered.” He paused to wipe sweat from his brow, then took up another shovelful of dirt. “In fact, your brother – he’s convinced that God *delights* in things like church collapses. Which maybe he does. I believe – I believe the center of the universe is unknowable. What made the big bang can’t be understood.

“What I do know is that your brother realized that there were no internal or, or external repercussions for feeding himself, for killing. God kills and saves indiscriminately, and… so does he. Whether God made man or man made God, they are each other’s mirror image. So why not… why not chase that *feeling* he had when he ate you, Mischa? Why not try to recapture it? Why not perfect it, work it into his design?”

Breathing hard, Will smoothed the earth back over the little grave, and cleaned the debris from around the headstone. He left the snails where they were, watching them glide in tiny increments over the stone’s rough surface. “If God’s unknowable, maybe Hannibal is, too. But he let me see him. He showed me hidden parts of himself and he… gave me the keys. To the memory palace.” Will glanced over his shoulder at the castle looming in the midnight darkness, the wet stones highlighted by the moon. “But Hannibal isn’t God. You, Mischa, you don’t explain Hannibal, or-or quantify what he does, but you’ll always be a part of him. Just like… he’ll always be a part of me.

“Because, ah… once upon a time, your brother met someone who had…” *something wrong with him,* Will wanted to say, but that was not what came out. It was as if Hannibal was speaking through him. “...a special power. A kind of magic that… other people were scared of. It allowed him to understand Hannibal in a way nobody else could. And your brother, he… wanted that understanding so badly. He was… very alone. He needed his friend to become… like *him* , so they could be together. In all things. Forever. And in doing so, Hannibal hurt his friend. They hurt each other.

“The story isn’t over. I-I don’t know the ending. Except that… I love him.

“That’s it.” Will ran his hand through his hair and cleared his throat. “That’s all there is to tell.”

Will picked up the lantern and his tools. He replaced everything where he’d found it, then took off his shoes and jacket. Curling up on the floor next to the table where he’d had tea with Chiyoh, he rested his head on a cushion and slept.

***

Will holds himself perfectly still as Garret Jacob Hobbs finishes buckling his bracers, the worn black leather pressing solidly against his arms like a second skin plated with steel. Tonight he faces the Monster. It may take the shape of a dragon, or a wolf, perhaps dressed as something else. It may come to him in the guise of a friend – someone safe, a mentor, luring him to his death in a gingerbread cottage. Fatten him up and throw him in the oven. Grendel, flesh-eater. A siren singing him to his doom, a kelpie luring him closer to the water, only to drag him down and devour him, leaving only entrails behind. Though this kelpie doesn’t mind offal, not in the slightest.

Will is prepared. He is strapped into black leather armor with a chain undershirt, shoulders protected by pauldrons, greaves on his legs over leather boots. He has foregone any protection from mid-thigh to calf in favor of mobility. The creature strikes fast, coils like a snake and sinks in his teeth. It is undoubtedly poisonous, though Will has built up an immunity after several battles in which he was bitten.

At last, Garret Jacob Hobbs drapes a black cloak over Will’s shoulders and fastens it to his pauldrons. It is a long, rich piece of fabric, the deepest ebony. “Think you’ll be able to kill him this time?” Hobbs asks, voice gravelly as it leaves his corpse-rotten throat. “You had him dead to rights last time and couldn’t pull the trigger. New Orleans all over again.”

“Guns lack intimacy,” Will says. “I told him once I’d kill him with my hands.”

“Whatever it takes.” Garret Jacob Hobbs holds out his palm. Will pauses a moment, then takes it. The fathers shake hands firmly, their mouths pressed into lines both formidable and grief-stricken.

With a final nod, Will takes his leave. He exits the Castle Lecter hunting lodge to find everyone waiting for him. Jack is dressed for battle as a Templar knight, his shield scored with a blood-red cross, a lance at his side. Bella Crawford stands with him in a lavender gown, holding the reins of a magnificent white steed. “Will!” Jack greets him. They grasp each other’s forearms, like the warriors of old. “Are you ready?”

Will nods as firmly as he can, and turns to the other women here to see them off. Georgia Madchen smiles shyly at him, brushing her auburn hair behind her ear, an anachronism in a hospital gown. Beside her is Abigail, wearing her traveling clothes, the coat with the oversized cowl, her hair drawn to one side. Then Alana Bloom as he remembers her that day in his living room when they’d shared a kiss. Next to her is Margot Verger, thin and pale, wrapped in her fur coat. And Beverly, in her maroon leather jacket as always, arms crossed at her waist, weight on one hip, a beaming smile curving up one side of her face. Her river of dark hair blows gently in the night breeze. She is holding the reins of his mount – the stag

with the feather-fur, outfitted with a saddle and bridle, a sword sheathed against its side, a quiver of arrows hanging from the opposite haunch.

"You cannot go into battle without my favor, Jack," Bella scolds him lovingly. She withdraws a perfumed handkerchief from the bosom of her gown and ties it around his lance.

"I will return it when we are victorious," Jack promises her, then plants a kiss on her full and waiting lips. He mounts the horse and nods at Will.

Will half-smiles awkwardly at the women waiting for him. Georgia comes forward, holding out her hand. In it is her totem; a fragment of burnt plastic, all that remains of the comb that Hannibal placed in her oxygen chamber. Will slides it into a small leather pouch on his belt. Georgia pulls him into a silent hug, then steps back. Next is Abigail. She offers him a bloodstained hunting knife, the one she used to kill Nicholas Boyle. "I know," she says apologetically, shifting from foot to foot. "It's, um… but it made me feel safe. Maybe it can protect you."

"Thank you." He takes the knife from her and slides it into a sheath on his belt that fits it perfectly. She grabs his hand and holds it between her own for a long moment. "Remember, Will. You can never do the wrong thing, just what you're supposed to."

Will nods, tears in his eyes. He moves on before they overcome him. Alana is next. She puts her arms around his neck and kisses him, the way she did in his living room with the chimney torn out. Only this time, he is not hesitant, unstable, unsure of what he's becoming. He's a warrior, and she knows it. "All I ever tried to do was protect you," she says. "Sometimes, that meant protecting you from yourself."

"I know," he says. "Now it's my turn to protect you."

They break apart. He turns to Margot. She does not say anything, but hands him a little knitted baby boot.

It is blue, and tied with a blue ribbon.

Hands quivering, he tucks it in the pouch along with the bit of comb.

Last, he turns to Beverly. "You can do this, Will," she says, choosing to punch him on the arm to hide the emotions that are plain on her face. He pulls her into an embrace instead and she squeezes herself tightly against his armor. Her offering is a little paper umbrella and a black drinking straw. They still smell like five dollar margaritas from Hacienda Las Glorias. Will puts them in his pouch.

Just as he is ready to put his foot in the stirrup, frantic barking catches everyone's attention. The dogs, his pack, race out of the woods for him. Laughing, he gets on his knees with the rustle of chain mail. He lets each dog lick his face in turn. He kisses their foreheads and rubs their ears as they mob him for attention.

"Will," Jack says, his voice booming out over the clearing. "It's time."

Will gets to his feet. He gives Winston one more stroke over his ears, then swings himself into the saddle. He and Jack ride off into the deep dark forest, following its twisting paths. Will looks back once to watch the women wave goodbye and the dogs whine and wag their tails. Abigail's throat is spilling, a fountain of red soaking her clothes. Alana weeps openly and Margot stands with her fur-clad arm around her, hollow-eyed as a specter. Beverly comes apart, slices of herself sliding into wet, bloody piles on the grass, until she is only half there. Her exposed organs still work furiously, though blood pools at her feet.

Georgia ignites.

Winston sits back on his haunches and emits a long, heartbroken howl.

"Will," Jack warns, snapping his attention away. "Stay focused. You can't help them now. We have to keep our eyes on the prize."

They break out of the deep dark wood and into the shadow of the castle. It juts from the cliff above, twisted and black in the moonlight. It is a cursed place. There is an evil spell over this land, the bloody afterbirth of the Monster.

Before them is a large, perfectly round lake, mirror-still. The water is murky and the shores teem with the ugly, vital life of the swamp, the reeds full of croaking frogs, the tall grasses infested with coiling snakes. In the center, half sunken, is the angel fountain, a monolith, an eldritch monument left behind by a lost civilization, the idol of a fallen god. It is cradled by mosses and vines, criss-crossed by a constant stream of snails, so many it fools the eye into thinking the stone moves, undulating with shells.

Jack makes a noise of disgust, but Will knows that the decomposition of swamp water, which makes it frothy and brown, gives it healing properties. The dark sky is busy with fireflies, the reflective surface of the lake making their multitudes legion.

"This is the land of trembling earth," Jack warns as they guide their mounts along the edge of the lake. "Watch your step."

Will can see where they are headed. On the other side of the lake is a bower of some kind, a misshapen thing heavy with vines and dark red and black blossoms that look like tongues and screaming mouths, their sweet-rot scent floating in the funerary air. Within it is something white, man-sized, lying supine on a small raised platform.

From nowhere, Chiyoh steps in their way. She is wearing a white kimono with gold and red accents, but the shotgun rests easily in her hands, a familiar companion.

"Stop," she warns, lifting the gun to her shoulder. "This trigger has a three-pound pull. I'm holding two of it."

"Stand aside, my lady," Jack orders. "Or we will go through you."

"You're trespassing." Her eye narrows against the gun's sights.

Will presses his tongue against his teeth and emits a sharp whistle. From out of the woods comes the Prisoner, filthy, half-naked, trailing chains. He runs like a feral creature on his feet and knuckles, ape-like. He crashes headlong into Chiyoh, toppling them both into the lake. The gun goes off uselessly into the sky.

There are only bubbles on the surface of the water. Surely they are fighting below, but the struggle between the two prisoners — and who will go free — is none of the warriors' concern.

"Will," Jack scolds. "You act without honor."

"Think she'll kill him now? Free herself?" Will murmurs curiously, watching the bubbles roil the lake's glassy surface. "I like her odds."

"The way is clear and a greater evil lies ahead," Jack reminds him, and Will nods, averting his eyes. Jack's right. He'd said something the Monster would say. Would do. Jack sets his mouth in a firm line "Will… when the time comes, will you do what needs to be done?"

Will presses his lips together and nods his assurance."Come." Will spurs his heels into the stag's flanks, urging him forward.

As they near the bower, its details emerge. The structure is fashioned of skeletal remains, long leg and arm bones twined together with strips of rough leather and twisted, thorny vines that droop heavily with carnivorous flowers. The joints of the bower are decorated intricately with skulls, ribs radiating from them like ossuary crowns. Ravens fly in and out of the foliage, calling to one another through the sea of fireflies. Snails shimmer wetly, dark spots on the bleached bones, each shell a miniature cosmos.

Beneath the bower lies the Monster. He is stretched out on an intricately engraved golden platform. The edge reads "Hannibal Lecter" on one side and "MYLIMA" on the other. Hannibal is lying in state, surrounded by enormous bundles of deep red roses and black peonies that fill the air with their thick, syrupy scent. He is waxy, unmoving, corpse-like, dressed in his usual three-piece suit; however, every inch of fabric, every stitch and accessory, shoes and laces – it is all made of the purest ivory white. In his immobile hands he clasps a bouquet of oleander, belladonna, and ragwort.

Jack slides his lance into the leather holster on his saddle and dismounts, freeing his large cross-shaped sword. Will climbs down as well, drawing his spatha and holding it loosely at his side. "We're in luck," Jack says out of the corner of his mouth as he wraps both armored hands around the handle of his weapon. "We caught the Monster while he slumbers."

"He's not sleeping. He looks… dead." Will's heart stumbles and pitches headlong into the cavern wall of his chest.

"Don't let that fool you," Jack warns. "This whole land is under a dark spell. He's poisoned it."

"Or someone poisoned him," Will argues, catching up with Jack as he advances on Hannibal's sleeping form. "There was violence here, Jack – someone killed his sister,

probably right in front of him."

"Mischa doesn't explain Hannibal," Jack retorts, continuing his cautious advance on the supine form. "You said it yourself, Will – she doesn't quantify what Hannibal does."

"Jack–"

"No, Will!" Jack roars at him, brandishing his sword. "He is the Monster. He's plagued us all for years. Have you forgotten already the women that saw you off on this quest, the tokens and favors they gave you? You carry with you all of their hopes for retribution. For justice!" He pauses, breathing hard. "Nothing happened to Hannibal, Will. Hannibal happened. "

Will takes a trembling breath and looks at the sky. The merciless arms of the spiral galaxies loom over them. They are part of the snail. They live on the back of her shell, all of them, all life. One shell in a sea of uncountable millions.There are worlds beyond these. Everything. Everyone, locked in the sacred spiral. Made of the same star-stuff.

"If everything that can happen happens, then you can never really do the wrong thing. You're just doing what you're supposed to," Will begins softly, but his sentence ends in a warning growl.

"What the hell does that even mean, Will? It sounds like an excuse to do bad things because you want to, not because you should." Jack drops his courtly, Arthurian speech, and sounds more like Will remembers him.

"Put the sword down, Jack," Will orders, voice firm but soft.

"Will, I'm warning you—"

"Jack, you're my friend. You're Hannibal's friend. Just walk away."

Jack's rage smolders in his eyes. "If you won't do it, I will," he vows. Turning, he takes three great strides toward Hannibal's prostrate form and raises the sword with both powerful arms, his Templar colors fluttering in the lake's breeze, a cool kiss of decay.

He brings it down in an arc, aiming for Hannibal's defenseless throat.

The clang of metal on metal rings out in the night, echoing up to the blanket of stars. The crows and ravens startle into the sky in a black flood of fierce beaks and sleek black feathers.

Will's arms shake with the force required, but he holds Jack's blade against his own.

"Get out of my way!" Jack snarls.

Will responds by coiling his body and using raw strength to throw Jack back away from the platform. He stumbles against one of the bony columns of the bower, and Will is on him, striking out with the smaller, lighter blade. Jack retaliates with a mighty blow that knocks Will off his feet. But as Jack raises the Templar sword to cave in his head, Will's spatha flashes like lightning in the moonlight, driving his blade into a seam in Jack's armor, running him through.

Jack stumbles back, a look of disbelief smeared across his face as blood wells to his lips. He falls to his knees. "You… deserve… each other," he gurgles. "He's going to eat you, Will."

"Maybe he will. Maybe he won't. Kiss or kill. I'm curious." Will whips the sword to the side, severing Jack's head in a fount of blood. It comes to rest at the base of the golden platform upon which the prince of the castle rests.

Better to be a prince in hell than a slave in heaven.

Will tosses his bloody sword to the ground and kneels with devoted reverence at the side of the Monster. The stag kneels as well, drooping its magnificent raven-black head and antlers. The prince is utterly perfect, not a hair out of place, the exposed skin pale in death but otherwise unblemished. The proud mouth rests in gentle repose, just one shade darker than the rest of the corpse-white flesh and the bridal hue of the suit.

Will leans closer. Up close, he can see that the lips are slightly parted. No breath escapes, but there is some kind of fleshy odor, rich and coppery like blood. It somehow cuts through the cloying scents of the flowers.

Not sure what he means to do, Will reaches out and gently pushes the prince's chin down. His mouth opens easily enough; there is no rigor. Will uses his other hand to tilt the prince's head back, opening the airway.

There is something lodged in his throat, just beyond the back of the mouth.

With the utmost care, Will inserts his fingers into the prince's mouth and hooks the object blocking his airway, drawing it slowly out before easing the lips back together again, smoothing the prince's hair to the side once more. He examines the object. It is flesh, a piece of meat. A firefly happens by at just the right moment to reveal its color and texture. It is liver. A piece of liver, perhaps, from Hannibal's first spring lamb.

Will gets to his feet, cloak brushing the piles of flowers around the platform, and walks to the edge of the murky lake. He holds the liver up to the stars, then drops it in the water.

He cannot be sure, but when he returns, he swears the prince's eyebrow twitched.

"All sorrows can be borne if you put them in a story," Will whispers, kneeling again at the prince's side. He knows what to do.

Resting a bracered hand on the prince's chest, he leans in and kisses him, a long, beautiful moment.

Will sits back, but remains kneeling at the prince's side.

Nothing happens.

It must not have been a true love's kiss.

Will knows he loves Hannibal, but perhaps this proves that it isn't reciprocated. Because Hannibal is incapable of love. A fondness for the lambs he would inevitably slaughter, a

pride for the murderers he nurtured or the people used as tools to manipulate them, a respect for the intelligence of investigators that managed to find him, showing exceptional cleverness. Affection. Lust. But not love.

Will lowers his head.

Then he feels it. Beneath the hand that rests on Hannibal's chest, beneath the layers of silk, there is a heartbeat.

Will half-expects a bird to fly out of Hannibal's body. That was the story Peter Bernadone had written to bear his sorrow.

Then, Hannibal's mouth opens, and he takes a deep breath, gasping in a lungful of air. Color blooms over his face in a sudden rush, restoring life to his flesh. Opening his eyes, he drops the bouquet of poison flowers to his side, and raises a hand to caress Will's face. Will takes it in his own and presses it to his cheek with a wide smile and a grateful, disbelieving laugh.

Magic.

***

I am dreaming.

This is strange. I rarely dream. I have weaned myself from it.

Dreams prepare us for waking life; they allow us to work out anxieties and frustrations in another realm to avoid contaminating the waking world with them. They act as our therapists.

I am a therapist, and I have a therapist.

Other theories suggest that dreams train us for fight-or-flight situations. Nightmares allow our brains to practice making life or death decisions.

I do not need practice.

Researchers have also theorized that sleep and dreaming help us sort through memories, deciding what to keep and what to discard.

I can do this consciously. I have an eidetic memory and have constructed my palace.

Why am I dreaming?

It is so clearly a dream. There is no confusion with reality. I am lying beneath a bower made of flowers and bones. Fireflies skim the night in flashing swarms and ravens paint the sky a deeper black. An ebony stag with feathers for fur is kneeling at the corner of the bower, its head bent in grief, the tines of its antlers glinting in the pale moon.

A current of unease ripples through me as I realize I am in some version of Lithuania, not far from Castle Lecter. Out of the corner of my eye I can see its dimensions ripping up into the

sky with its grotesquely elegant outline. There are many places here I cannot safely go.

All of this slips away as I feel a hand on my chest, over my heart.

Will.

Will kneels at my side, his face a wreck of absolute joy, tears in his eyes. He is wearing some kind of armor, 5th century AD, with Roman influence, even as the empire declines. It confuses me until it doesn't.

This is a fairy-tale. He is the knight and I am the prize. He thought I was dead, but I was only suffering the effects of a curse. I am restored to life.

I taste my bottom lip. Will. I half-smile in disbelief, reaching for his face. How romantic. Awakened by a kiss.

If we are playing by fairy-tale rules, it would only be a true love's kiss that could break the curse. Which means that Will's love is a mirror image of my own. I am elated as my brain releases the chemicals associated with such a realization.

He takes my hand from his face and uses it to help me sit up, supporting me behind my back. I kiss him again, and it is no chaste before-the-wedding kiss between a knight and a prince. If this is a dream, I can shape it, change it as I please. I do not have the need for dreams, but on the occasions where they happen, I am lucid and in control.

Will wraps us in his cloak, a long swath of velvet black. When he pulls away, the cloak slides from his shoulders and we are both naked beneath it. Except for his metal and leather bracers. I like those.

He angles me down again on the bier where I lay in state only moments ago, the golden platform that bears my name. Again, a sacred kiss that metamorphoses into something utterly profane. Will whispers his lips down my throat and I put my hand in his hair, splaying the other over the taut muscle of his back. He strokes the hair on my chest with careful greed, thumbs my nipple, then puts his mouth there, warm and wet, coaxing it to life the same way he brought me back to my own. Now the other, tongue undulating, serpent-like, before grazing it with his teeth.

From my navel downward. Will takes his time with every inch of my skin, beginning with the inner thighs, a place we reserve for one another, or so I have always thought. He seeks out each part, drawing what he can into his mouth for a few moments before releasing. In again. Now deeper, as deep as he can, burying my length against the cradling slope of his tongue. I rest my head on one of my arms, folded behind me, and savor the sensations as Will savors me with the same seductive enthusiasm. I am fully alive again, fully awake, every part of myself called back to life by his worship. A firefly lands in his hair and glimmers for a brief moment before it is called back to the sky. I let him hear me, every unconscious, reactive sound, as I play with the curls on the side of his head.

A knight in a tale might expect the prize at the end of the quest to accept a passionate ravaging, a claiming. I wait to see what I will do, just as curious about myself as anyone else.

I let my instinct guide me. I know from experience that being ravished by Will Graham is more than satisfying.

However, I, too, have been on a quest. I've faced much, fought many battles. There have been sacrifices.

Blood.

Will is my prize, the thing waiting in the highest room of the tallest tower. Will, transformed, ready to fly.

I stop myself before I climax. "Will."

He pauses, then sits back on his heels. I like the bracers, rough and warlike on his petal skin. I like him kneeling.

I take him by the hip and the back of the neck and reverse our positions, none too gently. He resists briefly, but then I part his knees, and they open for me like a well-read book, though I sense there are some chapters within him that he hasn't shown me yet. I kiss him roughly and draw one hand from the round of his buttock up the underside of his thigh, then cup the back of his knee to adjust the position as he curves his other leg around me. I take hold of myself and circle the hole, teasing the pucker of muscle. Will is an adaptable creature; he may have had his ideas about what would happen but is happy enough to abandon them, tossing his head back and closing his eyes as he sighs in supplication.

This is how it always is with Will. He fights me, he resists the transformation, he turns his back on the rare gifts I offer, but just as often, he submits to me after a brief struggle that's mostly a show for an audience of his morals and virtues. Keeping up appearances. He lives on a knife's edge, pulled and influenced on both sides. When Jack and human-created morality won the tug-of-war last time, the knife's edge went into his abdominal cavity.

I raise his leg further, just an inch, so I can detour briefly to kiss his Sarmatian knee, gripping it from beneath to enjoy the fine musculature and roped tendons through the veil of his skin, paradoxically soft. I release this limb and put both hands on the cool surface of the golden platform beneath us and lean over him. He grasps me feverishly, fingers winding around the back of my neck and my rib cage, begging for it.

Because this is a dream, he is wet for me, and thoroughly prepared. My thrust pushes me in with complete ease, burying me in him entirely, warm and tight and familiar. It occurs to me that Will is the longest continuous sexual partner I've ever had. It was two autumns ago that he first kissed me and I gave him pleasure, only to have him flee my bed. So much has happened since.

I do not know why I hadn't considered this anniversary until right now, in this fairy-tale landscape, in a lucid dream filled with bones and flowers and fireflies.

Panting, still enveloped in him, I lean over and rest my elbows on the platform, cradling his head in my hands, blanketing him with my body, my mouth over his. He circles his legs around me, resting his heels on the top of my pelvic bone. He angles his body for the best

chance of internal satisfaction and I give him another powerful thrust that makes him gasp, digging his fingertips into my back. I bask in his apotheosis as he gazes up at me, and I stroke his hair back from his forehead.

This close, I can see a few flecks of dried blood on his cheekbone. I run the pad of my finger over them. "Whose?" I ask breathlessly, pulling back for another deep impaling.

"Jack's," he tells me, then inhales sharply as I drive into him. I can feel him quivering; he is close. Not yet, my love. That goes for both of us.

"You killed Jack?"

Will nods. "He was going to kill you in your sleep."

I push myself up with my hands and look. Indeed, there is Jack's headless body, his blood staining the pristine white tunic of a crusader, the red of life blending perfectly with the red of the cross that failed to protect him.

I angle my hips and give him another stroke, tensing my thighs. He makes a pleading sound that doesn't have an accompanying word, but it is disastrously beautiful.

"He questioned my honor," Will panted, "and then h-had the… audacity to wanna kill you when you couldn't see it coming."

"You're a means to an end for him. You always were," I tell him. I am so proud I feel tears in my eyes. I work myself against him and he ruts against me in response. I pull out, then bury myself again in one forceful movement that makes him inhale sharply and quiver on the brink. Now I increase my speed, giving into him at last. He climaxes and his cry disturbs the fireflies where they linger on the roses strewn around us.

Even as he breathes through the orgasm I take him with both hands around his hips and lift him, rearing back on my knees. Still buried inside, I rest his buttocks on my thighs and thrust in again from a new angle. He presses on the backs of my thighs with his heels and rolls his hips, and there is no stopping either of us now, no prolonging of the moment. We find a rhythm and then we find bliss, together, in harmony.

Breathing heavily, still inside him, I gather him behind the ribs and lift him. It is a dream, so I have whatever strength I need, wrapping my arms around his back and shoulders, I press him to me, heart against heart.

After many moments, I lower him back down on the bier that is meant to be my sepulcher and caress his cheek and hair, smiling unabashedly down at him. He is flushed and weakened from the encounter, a fine sheen of perspiration making his skin glow in the ambient pulse of fireflies.

Tears gather in my eyes. "You realize," I say, "that when we are together, each of us fully committed and locked into a true, unwavering trust that we will be unstoppable. The world, ours."

“I don’t want the world. I just want you,” he admits and I cannot help but kiss him again, and again, my fingers trailing over the fine lines of his jaw, positioning his stubbled chin just so.

“We construct fairytales and we accept them.” Jack’s voice. But how? He’s dead. All right, some dream magic then. But I did not allow it and I am in control.

We rise and find Jack’s severed head resting among the roses and black peonies. Impossibly, it speaks. Fairytale magic again. But I am lucid dreaming and I did not make this happen.

I look at Will. He locks eyes with me for a moment and I recognize how astonishingly real he looks. He has all the imperfections I’ve come to love but that he cannot see as beautiful. I hold up my wrists. I still have my faint scars from Matthew Brown.

If I were fully in control, they would not exist.

A moment of cascading realization, followed by the nausea that can accompany motion – driving on hills, plane turbulence. This is a dream but it is also something else.

I used psychic driving on Will, subjecting him to light therapy and drugs like sodium amytal. His inner monologue spoke in my voice. Perhaps it still does. I was in his head. I still am.

I had not ever considered that Will could do something to my mind that I was unaware of. I have accepted that I love him, my only experience with what I now know is the kind of love that draws human beings together, mating for a lifetime. But part of my horror at this moment is that he has changed me in more ways than showing me I am capable of love.

He loves me. I love him, and I have been in his mind. It was foolish of me to think his extraneous mirror neurons did not hold some kind of connecting power.

I can feel the connection. I have no doubt it exists. The only question, really, is if he did it on purpose, or if it is just a side effect of everything we’ve ever been to one another. Betrayer and betrayed. Lover and beloved. Friend and enemy. Carbon. Stardust.

Jack’s head speaks again. “Our minds concoct all sorts of fantasies when we don’t want to believe something.”

Will drops his chin and looks at his hands. They tremble.

“Will.” I try to say it in a way that might soothe him.

He looks at me again, and his eyes are sharp, flinty, pieces of broken blue glass. He leans over and pulls something out of a bouquet of red and black flowers. It is Abigail’s knife, still smeared with the maroon stains of Nicholas Boyle’s blood.

Even as a tear spills from his eye, he slits my throat. I watch my arterial spray bloom over his face and neck, an alchemical melding of blood, water, and salt.

I open my eyes.

It takes me several moments to reorient myself as neurotransmitters from my medulla misfire until they don't. Again, my heart rate is elevated. Will's ability to affect it exists in dreams also. I note this in my mind with a clinician's interest in data, but the knowledge gives me a sense of unease like I have glimpsed something preternatural that human eyes were not meant to see. This in turn is unsettling because I believe no such thing exists. If God can bear witness, so can we.

Bedelia is up and gone already, her usual routine on mornings such as this; coffee in the Piazza del Duomo and then to the market for a few things like wine and truffles. I have routines as well – I always have, but I feel impaired by the dream, and cannot follow them.

At last I put on some clothes and go to the piano. I play until my fingers ache and my lumbar vertebrae feel compressed from the hard bench. This is how Bedelia finds me. She speaks of unimportant things like a new art gallery opening, and a regular at the café she frequents. I do not stop playing. One piece flows into another and I respond to her speaking monosyllabically. Rude.

She pauses and cuts me with her canny eyes, just as Will sliced me open in the dream, the hilt of her dagger the abrupt change of subject. "What your sister made you feel was beyond your conscious ability to control or predict."

The topic isn't entirely unexpected. We have discussed Mischa frequently in the past few weeks, ever since I told her that I suspect Will is headed to Lithuania after Palermo.

"Or negotiate," I say. I am still playing. *Fantasie-Valse* pours out of my hands in a continuous stream, starting over again and again.

"I would suggest what Will Graham makes you feel is not dissimilar. A force of mind and circumstance."

"Love. He pays you a visit or he doesn't." Will's name, spoken aloud, makes my music edge away from playful and charming. I use more force on the keys. It is not what the music says, but I let myself do it. I see fragments of the dream. I see my blood spray Will's face, even after he murdered Jack to save me and brought me back to life.

"Same with forgiveness. And I would argue the same with betrayal." Bedelia has that infuriating look on her face that she makes when she knows she is right.

I evade. "The god Betrayal. Who presupposes the god Forgiveness." I think of the monolith rising from the lake in our dream.

"We can all betray. Sometimes we have no other choice."

I apply more force to the keys, ignoring my screaming tendons and the ache in my lower back. Once in a while, I have trouble with L1 and L2, and sitting this long has inflamed it. I do not stop playing. "Mischa didn't betray me. She influenced me to betray myself but I forgave her that influence."

The knowing look only deepens on her features. “If past behavior is indicative of future behavior, there is only one way you will forgive Will Graham.”

I can only forgive him if he no longer has power over me. I can reclaim myself if his agency is gone, and he is a living, sustaining memory absorbed into my essence. He will no longer compromise my decisions. He will not be able to betray me again. He will not control my dreams.

I know this and my heart breaks with the weight of the knowledge.

The words leave my mouth without conscious thought, a moment of complete reflex. As soon as I hear them, process them, I know they are true. “I have to eat him.”

Season 3 Episode 4: Aperitivo

Chapter Summary

After Alana finds Will communing with Hannibal and Abigail in Hannibal's deserted house, Will steals something important to him, and brings it to a hotel. We are introduced to a new original character, Julien Honoré, just for a night.

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “The Curse” by Agnes Obel

“And the people went into their hide, ay-oh
From the start they didn't know exactly why, why
Winter came and made it so all look alike, look alike
Underneath the grass would grow, aiming at the sky
It was swift, it was just another wave of a miracle
But no one, nothing at all would go for the kill
If they called on every soul in the land, on the moon
Only then would they know a blessing in disguise
The curse ruled from the underground, down by the shore
And their hope grew with a hunger to live unlike before
The curse ruled from the underground, down by the shore
And their hope grew with a hunger to live unlike before
Tell me now of the very soul that look alike, look alike
Do you know the stranglehold covering their eyes?
If I call on every soul in the land, on the moon
Tell me if I'll ever know a blessing in disguise
The curse ruled from the underground, down by the shore
And their hope grew with a hunger to live unlike before
And the curse ruled from the underground, down by the shore
And their hope grew with a hunger to live unlike before”

Episode 4 goes back in time to fill in some gaps. Mostly we see Chilton checking in with our main characters post Mizumono, looking for a team-up. This scene happens right after the part where Alana sneaks into Hannibal’s house and finds Will in the kitchen “visiting old friends.” Will asks to be alone so he can build rooms in his memory palace. This scene happens about a week later.

“Evening, Robyn,” Julien greeted as he slid into the backseat of the town car.

“Hey there, Mr. Honoré, good to see you.” Robyn already had the air conditioning cranked, even as the Baltimore metropolitan area languished under the threat of a heavy snowfall later in the week. As his regular driver when Julien was in town, she knew he ran hot and didn’t like to arrive with a wilted shirt collar. “Where are you headed tonight? Another gallery opening? Or, lemme guess… film festival?”

“I’m working tonight,” Julien said as he flipped his phone out of the inner pocket of his overcoat to check his messages and scan through notifications.

“Oh, sure. Royal Sonesta?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“You got it.” Robyn pulled into traffic. She wove between lanes as needed with a practiced grace that seemed out of place for someone so young. Or young-looking; Robyn’s red hair and freckles made her seem wholesome and ageless. Julien had no idea how old she really was compared to his 45 years. “Say,” Robyn piped up, “I saw one of Maya’s sculptures at the Rawlings Conservatory when I was there a couple months back. It’s amazing. I love her take on the angel idea with all that repurposed stuff, that was… wow. Really cool.”

“Thank you, I’ll tell her you said so.” Julien’s phone vibrated in his hand. “Speak of my devil.” He pressed the call button. “ *Bon soir, cherié .”*

“None of that *cherié* shit,” Maya snapped, her voice crackling through the aether. Her words spat off of the cell towers and into his ear. “You’re going, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Julien said with steady patience. “I’m going.”

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” She was loud enough that Robyn glanced in the rear view mirror. “The guy was accused of not one, not two, but five — *five* fucking murders, Jules, Jesus Christ!”

“And he was acquitted, if you remember.”

“It’s not worth the risk!” Maya hissed into his ear.

“Darling, we vetted him like everyone else.”

“Yeah and he’s a cop, too, don’t forget.”

Julien angled his head back, pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand, and squeezed his eyes shut. “He’s no longer employed by any police department or teaching at Quantico. He told me he was consulting for a while but not anymore.”

“I don’t like it. This is a stupid risk and you know it. I *just* sold the ironwork piece. You can’t tell me we need the money.”

Julien sighed, but didn't respond.

"I know why you're doing this," she said, softer now. "Admit it. You've been thinking about the old days. When it was more dangerous."

"You know me very well," he said in his most soothing voice, with a dash of seduction, playing up his accent.

"Can you just… come home?" Her desperation made him wince.

"I can't, Maya. But I promise you, I'll take every precaution. You know I always do."

She sighed into the phone. There was weight to it "You are in big fucking trouble. I mean it. It's not cute. Don't be cute with me about it. I am *not* happy."

"You have made yourself entirely clear, *cherié*."

"You better text me," she warned.

"Promise."

"Love you."

"Love you, too."

He hung up the phone and slid it into his jacket again.

"Oof," Robyn winced. "That sounded… this guy's law enforcement?"

"Very formerly, at this point in his life."

"Must be a new client, then."

"Yes," he confirmed.

"So the usual routine? Circle the block for the first hour?" Robyn glanced at him in the mirror.

"Yes, if you can." Julien opened up his phone again and flipped the camera app to face him so he could check his silvery-chestnut hair.

"I'm off at midnight, but got you covered until then. After that, you can call and they'll send somebody else."

"Any idea who's on the schedule?" Julien didn't like riding with Sam, who always had some kind of thinly-veiled barb to offer, and listened to right-wing political radio until Julien told him to change stations. Every time.

"Javier. He's new. Have you met him yet?"

"Not yet."

“He’s cool,” Robyn promised. “Really nice.” She chuckled. “His greatest offense is trying to grow a mustache and not really succeeding.” Julien laughed and Robyn joined him. “Maybe you could give him some tips. You’re always put together. Got that whole silver fox thing”

“With pleasure.”

Soon, they arrived at the hotel’s lobby drive-up. Robyn hustled to open his door and retrieve his bag from the trunk. “Whoa, you’re extra dressed up tonight,” she commented as she set the wheeled suitcase on the pavement and extended the handle for him.

Julien was a meticulous dresser, but part of dressing well, he thought, was looking elegantly effortless. A three-piece suit was not effortless. “I haven’t worn this since November 2012,” he said as he smoothed the cuffs. “I snuck into a fundraiser or two.”

“Gotta blend in.” Robyn gave him a silly little salute that made him smile with teeth. “I’ll be close. Stay safe, ‘kay?”

“Thanks, Robyn. Until next time.”

Julien took hold of his suitcase handle and strode into the hotel lobby and headed for the front desk. “Good evening. You should have a letter for Honoré?”

“Yes sir.” The clerk retrieved it from beneath the desk and handed it to him. Julien took it with his thanks and got on the elevator. Only then did he open the sealed envelope. The room key was folded up in a piece of paper with the room number scrawled on it.

Even though he had the key, Julien still knocked.

A man’s voice from within said, “Come in.”

Julien guided the electronic key over the door knob and waited for the soft beep before he pushed the door open with gentle fingers. The lights were low. His client sat in the chair by the desk, but stood when Julien entered.

Julien swept the room with practiced eyes. The bathroom door was open, the shower curtain pulled back. Closets open. There was a bottle of wine and two glasses on the desk, along with a corkscrew. The only thing that seemed strange was that his client had removed the hotel’s bedding from the king size and replaced the sheets with a set that were cream instead of ivory. The hotel sheets and duvet had been folded with meticulous precision and stacked on the luggage rack.

His client shifted, an awkward gesture, and pressed his lips together into a brief line. “Do we, ah… shake hands?”

“We certainly can.” Julien parked his bag near the side of the bed and met his client at the end of it, where they clasped palms for a brief moment. “Julien. You must be Will.”

“Yeah.” Will pulled away from him in a quick movement, eyes anywhere but on Julien’s.

Julien studied his new client next, the way he subjected all of them to careful scrutiny. There was a rumpled green jacket, something outdoorsy, hanging on the back of the desk chair. His client wore gray jeans, a slightly wrinkled red and tan plaid shirt, and the same glasses from his photo. He seemed a little disheveled, unshaven, sleep-deprived, very much a distracted professor. Julien stole a glance at his hands and saw no ring, or the mark of one. “It’s nice to put a face to a name,” Julien said, and let a gentle smile cross his features. He could feel the indecision and anxiety that radiated off of this man. But such emotions were not unusual for a first-timer.

“So, uhm…” Will put his hands in his pockets and shrugged, a miniscule, helpless movement. “How do we, uh…”

“Wine?” Julien suggested. “I see you brought a bottle.”

“Right.”

“Let me. Please.” Julien offered Will back his seat. Will settled in and watched him open the bottle with a few practiced movements. Julien poured them each a glass. He sat on the end of the bed and let Will look him over, though it was clear his client was trying not to visually grope him. Manners. That was a positive sign.

“This is very good,” Julien complimented after a sip. Will drink half of his glass with a few nervous swallows. “You seem to know wine.”

“I know someone who knows wine.”

“My mother is from Bédarrides, which is only a few miles from this vineyard,” Julien told him. Perhaps a little conversation would help put his client at ease.

“But you didn’t grow up there.”

Julien blinked. “No, I didn’t.”

Will glanced at him, then looked away, fiddling with a crease on his sleeve. “Sorry. I, uh, used to work in, um… criminal profiling. But, uh, like I told you, I’m not law enforcement anymore.”

“You’re correct. My father is Latvian. I lived in several different places growing up.” He smiled. “You must have been good at your job before…”

“Going on trial for murder?” Will’s chuckle was cheerless. “Guess I shoulda figured you’d know about that. And yet, you still agreed to see me.”

Julien studied him, head cocked. “Should I be worried for my safety, Will?”

Will shook his head. “I’m not a murderer.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through something like that. The American justice system in general is fallible, to say the least.” They took another drink in silence. “I’m not here to pass any kind of judgment on you whatsoever, do you understand?”

Will nodded, but Julien could still sense the uncertainty. His ability to pick up on cues and emotions was very reliable, and necessary in this business. He felt that Will was telling the truth — he wasn't in danger. Still, a little thrill tickled through him. His instincts were good, but not faultless. Maya was right. He *was* here for a tiny taste of danger, as well as for work.

"Shall we take care of business first?" Julien pulled out his phone and sent Maya a quick text, just an emoji to let her know he was fine.

Will pulled his coat from the back of the chair and stood to hand an envelope to Julien, then reclaimed his seat. Julien flipped through the bills inside, then set the envelope on the bedside table. "Do you have any questions for me?"

"N-no. You were pretty clear when we talked on the phone." Will then contradicted himself by speaking again. "Your discretion policy…?" He trailed off.

Julien waited, then assured him, "I built my reputation on discretion. I came to the US to work in Washington DC."

"Politicians?"

Julien nodded. "Reputation is everything in this line of work. For my clients and for me. Everything that we do or say stays between us. I treat my clients' privacy very seriously, like a doctor would."

"Not tempted to, uh, run to someone like Freddie Lounds?"

Julien smiled briefly. " *Tattlecrime* ? That would be the kiss of death for my career."

"That makes two of us. Except it already happened for me." Will drained his wine with a bitter scoff.

Julien finished his glass as well, then stood to put it on the desk next to Will's.

"Anything further?"

His client exhaled, a little tremble in his voice. "Guess not."

"Are you ready?"

"Guess so." Will stood, but then didn't move. Julien stepped closer, and reached out a hand. He kept his movements slow and precise, still very aware of the waves of apprehension that radiated from the man in front of him. He lifted Will's glasses from his face and folded them with gentle fingers, then set them in the desk at his side. As he turned back, he was startled by the rich color of Will's eyes, a fierce turquoise. He acknowledged that he found his client handsome, though it was inconsequential to the work. Will was much more attractive in person than in pictures, that much was certain. If he'd wanted to, he could have easily found company in a bar to bring home for the night. But perhaps that wasn't what Will truly needed. Julien was here to give him what was going to fulfill him the most, to the best of his ability. That was how he built his business, and found fulfillment of his own.

“Still only what we discussed over the phone?” Julien asked. He didn’t understand why his client would pay so much for so little, but that was none of his concern. He only sought clarification.

Will nodded. “S-so, how do we, uh…”

“Are you comfortable with me touching you, or do you need more time?”

Will took a breath and let it out in a slow exhale, though it seemed to have no effect on the visible tension in his shoulders. “Go ahead.”

Julien knew to proceed with care, to give Will the time he needed. He reached out and took Will’s hand to hold between both of his. Will looked down at their hands together instead of meeting his eyes. Julien held on for what felt like a full minute, maybe longer, until he no longer detected the minute tremors in Will’s fingers. A flush had risen to Will’s cheekbones already, bringing out a fetching shade and a kind of innocence that made Julien wonder how anyone could have thought this man was a murderer. Yet he knew from experience it was possible for people from all walks of life to be both beautiful and deeply cruel.

“All right so far?”

Will nodded in assent.

“Good.” Julien let go of Will’s hand with one of his and placed it on Will’s shoulder. He applied a slight pressure to guide him forward, easy enough to resist, which Will did for a few seconds before he closed the space between them. Julien angled his own chin down a bit; Will was shorter by a few inches, and he needed to be able to see his eyes, even if they weren’t going to look directly at one another.

At last, Will seemed to allow himself to be embraced. Julien was still mindful, only using one arm, the other hand still clasped in Will’s. Will was stiff and unresponsive in the hug, but Julien was not deterred. He waited Will out, and was rewarded when the other man finally softened against him. Will pressed his forehead into Julien’s shoulder. His breath broadened and deepened, and his muscles relaxed. Will dropped hands and wrapped his arms around, their grasp firm, then desperate. His fingers closed around the fabric of the suit jacket, then released to caress instead until the grip returned.

“That’s it,” Julien murmured against the top of Will’s head. He appreciated the silky texture of the dark, gleaming curls and their clean, human smell. He wanted to touch them, but knew better, and was practiced in denying his own urges. In the end, this was work. “Talk to me. How are you feeling?”

“Good,” Will admitted, and the simple word rang with deep-seated relief as he turned his face, cheek pressed against Julien’s lapel.

“Are you ready to lie down?”

Will nodded against his chest.

“Do you want to stay fully dressed?”

Will hesitated. “Uhm, I was— I don’t know.”

“Skin-to-skin contact is therapeutic.”

Will pulled back suddenly, out of his grasp. “What, you’re-you’re like a therapist, too?” There was something flinty and pointed in his gaze as he suddenly locked eyes with Julien. A little ripple of unease disturbed the air.

“You haven’t had a good experience with therapy,” Julien guessed.

“You could say that.”

Julien nodded. “This is your time, Will. We can talk or not, keep our clothing on or not. I’m not a therapist. I have met many people, and met their needs. To do so requires a rudimentary understanding of how people work. What makes them, ah… tick.” Will’s eyes were distracting enough that he had trouble remembering the saying in English.

“I’m sorry,” Will said, his apology frank and immediate. “Yes, I had a… I had an experience. Obviously it, uhm… yeah.”

Julien kept his expression neutral. “Tell me what you need.”

Will extended his hand and touched the Windsor knot of Julien’s tie. “I think I want to…”

“Go ahead,” Julien encouraged. Will slid the knot down, then used quick, deft fingers to release it. He snaked it out from Julien’s collar and set it on the desk next to his glasses. Julien eased himself out of his jacket and hung it on a drawer knob. Will took over. Each button of the vest seemed to give him more assurance. By the time Julien shrugged free of it, Will was already at work on the shirt buttons, his movements practiced and steady.

As Julien removed the cuff links and opened the garment entirely, he allowed himself a brief moment of self-satisfaction at Will’s reaction to his body — an expression of authentic, appreciative surprise. He noticed that Julien had tracked his reaction and blushed further. “You, uh…” he stumbled.

“Thank you. When you work with your body, your body is your work.”

Will extended a hand towards his silvery-brown chest hair, groomed today, but stopped short. Julien tried to project an encouraging silence as he removed his garment and hung it over his jacket. Will dropped his hand.

“May I?” Julien asked.

Will have him a silent gesture of assent.

Julien reached out, again with deliberate patience, and unfastened the first button of Will’s shirt. Will’s breathing ticked up, then evened out as he went button by button. He took Will’s

hands, one at a time, and unfastened the cuffs, then stepped closer to slide the shirt free of his body, letting it rest on the seat of the nearby desk chair.

Will was relatively smooth beneath. Just a little dark hair at the nipples and below his navel. His musculature was wiry and utilitarian, the kind of physique won from varied hard labor, not gym-worship for the sake of aesthetics. In his brief inspection, Julien noted with some apprehension the sizable scar, a raised white slice that circumnavigated his abdomen. It looked like he'd had a major surgery, recent enough that the scar was textured and pink at the edges. He didn't let his eyes linger or ask any silent questions; he smiled at Will instead, an expression of encouragement. "Should we keep going?"

"Y-yeah, I think so."

Julien undid Will's belt and pooled his jeans around his ankles to reveal a pair of very ordinary pale blue shorts. He eased Will's utilitarian socks from his feet as well. His client seemed anxious again, his eyes too bright with it, so Julien removed the rest of his own clothing down to his black briefs.

"That's enough, uhm, for-for now."

"Certainly," Julien soothed, and took Will's hand between his own again. "Shall we?"

Will nodded. They got into bed between the top and bottom sheet. There was a distinctive, rich smell to the pillow cases, something exotic and luxurious. A cologne of some kind, though not one Will himself was wearing, as far as Julien could tell.

Understanding dawned in him, as did curiosity. He kept his observations to himself, however.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Like this?" Julien lifted his arm.

"Just like that," Will breathed, his voice grateful, heavy with appreciation. He inched up against Julien's side and tucked himself under his arm, resting his head on his chest, ear over Julien's heart. His fingers shook as he splayed his hand against Julien's midsection. His body was taut, drawn and tight, and Julien could feel an ache radiate from him.

Julien wrapped his arm around Will, and his other hand descended to press his palm against the back of Will's hand where it rested. He began with light pressure, then pulled Will in closer to himself. As he thought might happen, Will's rigidity bled away and he became malleable. He formed himself to Julien's body, and created a posture that communicated an undeniable need for affection.

"How does this feel?"

"Good," Will murmured against his skin, moving the pads of his fingers against Julien's chest hair. "Really… It's good. Just like this."

“All right.” Julien relaxed and looked up at the hotel room’s textured ceiling, and watched the lights of far away traffic traverse the expanse.

If it was possible, Will’s body relaxed even more. Julien wondered if he would fall asleep. If so, that was entirely all right, though his client had paid a hefty price for a good night’s rest. Still, he seemed to need it – Will was hollow-eyed, exhausted. Julien resolved to move as little as possible, even if it meant his arm went numb. Even after he made his vow, and time passed, he sensed a growing discomfort in his client as he shifted his position. The unease seemed mental as well as physical, though Will made no outward sign. Julien felt it like a kind of atmospheric pressure.

“Would you like to talk about him?” he asked, just above a whisper.

“Who?” Julien noted that the very second the word left his lips, Will covered his abdominal scar with his splayed hand, either caressing or protecting it.

“The person who these sheets belong to.”

Will shifted onto his other side and Julien read his cue. They moved into a spooning position. Julien drew Will with a secure firmness against himself, Will’s head resting on his outstretched arm. Though Will allowed this, he had gone rigid again. Silence, aside from the hum of the hotel room’s HVAC.

Julien let his hand drift down to hover over Will’s navel. “Can I feel it? You can say no.”

He felt Will nod against his shoulder. Julien brushed his fingers along the scar, noting its knotted texture. The skin there was colder than the surrounding flesh, which had taken on a kind of feverish warmth that was going to make Julien sweat before too long. “Did he do this to you?”

Will let out a near-silent sigh. “Everyone who, ah, intersected with him – they came away missing something. Things they needed. Weren’t… *finished* with.” He paused. “Things they loved.”

Julien put his hand over the scar. It was almost long enough to cover it entirely, and he cupped his grip as if his touch was a bandage. The tension in Will’s body bled away in increments, and Julien waited to see if he would speak further. His mind was loud as it made connections – he’d read that Will had been injured in the line of duty in an attempt to bring the Chesapeake Ripper to justice eight months ago. Was it possible that the Chesapeake Ripper was the man whose memory Will clung to? It was almost too much to fathom. Again, Julien felt a thrill trickle through his body, and it invigorated his sense of risk. Damn Maya, but she’d been right on the money.

The Chesapeake Ripper was still out there somewhere. He hadn’t been caught, but Will had. Caught in some kind of limbo that Julien could sense like a tangible thing hanging around Will’s graceful neck. He did his best to not react, but listen.

“This morning, I woke up and… before I remembered I was seeing you today, I didn’t – I didn’t think of him for a few minutes. Before the weight of the day hit me, I didn’t even think

about him. Didn't wonder where he was, what he was doing. If he was safe, if-if he was… thinking about *me* . If he ever did. Then it all came back. And it felt like… it feels like being crushed, one stone at a time."

Pressing , Julien thought. Like what the courts at Salem had done to Giles Corey, accused witch. He'd been placed under a board, and stones were added to a pile atop it until he was unable to breathe and expired. His last words had been, " *More weight.* " Maya had done a whole series of sculptures based on historical witch hunts and he remembered the story from sections of her research he'd assisted with.

Before his brain offered up a conscious decision, Julien had shifted up onto his elbow to look down at Will, who was now on his back. He pushed the sheet down and ran his hand over the smile of mended flesh. "Your body repairs itself. It takes time. All parts of us believe in self-preservation. We fight to exist, down to the most basic cells. *C'est une merveille.* "

Will's throat worked as his eyes misted over. "You even sound like him. I mean, some of the things you say," he whispered.

"Hmm." Julien's hand moved away from the scar and found a place below Will's collarbone, then caressed downward along the smooth skin there. "I'm here for your use. Your needs. Think about what will help you, if I remind you of him."

"You might not want to offer me that," Will said as he raised a hand to wipe his eye. "There is a very strong part of me that, ah, would *really* like to kill him."

Again, the thrill of fear. "Murder costs extra," Julien said with a little smile, and was rewarded when Will mirrored the expression as though it were a reflex. With a similar unplanned action, Julien ran the back of his fingers down Will's scratchy cheek and under his chin. He sensed Will inch forward, and took it as an invitation.

The kiss was somehow chaste and deeply sensual in one simultaneous moment. Julien didn't often kiss clients on the mouth; he avoided it whenever possible. He wanted one act that was reserved for his private life, that existed outside of work. The compulsion to kiss Will, however, he found irrepressible, despite his conscious thoughts that cried otherwise. This was work. He knew better than to succumb to any emotions that arose. He'd been in the profession for years. What was different about this man? Why did Julien suddenly desire, with a certain degree of desperation, to *be* whoever it was Will was fixated on? It felt like a compulsion. It felt supernatural, or like some kind of MK-Ultra mind control.

The kiss deepened, and his body responded with insistent immediacy. He found himself untempered by caution and the delicacy of the situation. Without asking, he slid over Will's body, and pressed into him to gauge his own physical reaction, which seemed enthusiastic to say the least. Julien broke away from Will's mouth as if compelled by a silent command, and kissed his throat instead. Will heaved a great exhale, and his tension mellowed further at Julien's treatment, his hands on Julien's back and behind his head. Will's long neck seemed to emit some kind of signal or pheromone that Julien could not resist; he inhaled deeply and tasted the skin with his lips and tongue. They traveled down the slope to where Will's neck swept into his shoulder, then followed the bony line of clavicle to the hollow below his

Adam's apple, then back up again. They both breathed harder now, and tension of a different sort was under construction.

Julien managed to repel the strange and troublesome desire to bite Will, harder than one would in play, to suck on his skin until it bruised a deep, mottled purple. That was so far out of line that he managed to fight through the fog of desire and chastise himself for it. Inappropriate and unsafe. He snuffed the wish by returning to Will's mouth, which he found eager and greedy for more.

Julien broke it off to whip back the sacred sheet that felt too much like a shroud. Will pushed himself higher up on the headboard and Julien knelt before him. He placed one hand on Will's knee, then used the other to stroke him from the ankle of the opposite leg up to his thigh.

"Now what would he do?"

"Undress me."

Julien curled his fingers around the waistband and pulled to uncover Will entirely, then hurried to join him. As he took in Will's complete nudity and other scars, he felt the pressure of something otherworldly that seemed to coordinate with his actions, as if he were invaded, puppeteered by the nameless man from Will's past, the presence of, perhaps, the Chesapeake Ripper.

Will was not objectively the most beautiful person Julien had ever been intimate with. But in some kind of simultaneous miracle, he *was* , in the way Maya was perfect to him because she was his chosen one. " *Mon coeur,* " he said before he could stop himself.

That made Will smile, and it was a heartbreaking victory.

Julien fondled Will's thighs and stroked the soft inner skin with his thumbs. He leaned in to brush his lips over Will's cock. "Does he do this for you?"

"Yes."

Julien began his performance, and took care to utilize every ounce of experience and skill he had, coupled with the strange presence of someone else in the room with them. Not just in the room, but acting through him. It was like how he imagined possession must feel. It hung on him, heavy and dark, the shadow of a curse. And even as he was alarmed, he let himself sink deeper into it. He paused only to slide to the side of the bed and open the outer pouch of his suitcase. He pulled out a quick array of things and tossed them on the bed before resuming oral. The spirit inside him delighted in Will's arousal, the way the tendons in his fingers and the cords in his neck stood out when he snared his fingers into the sheets. He panted and moaned and it sounded like music.

Julien stopped as he sensed Will tense his thighs. He knew what to do next without being told, and rolled onto his back. He coaxed Will up and over him. Will was more than ready to comply with the silent request and reciprocated while one hand felt around on the bed for one of the lubricants. He found one and applied it generously to his hand, then pressed into

Julien's ass with firm surety. He prepped the way while performing intermittent, frustratingly slow and shallow oral that was bitterly sensual all at once. It felt like a delightful punishment.

An unknown voice erupted in his mind.

I wanted to surprise you. And you wanted to surprise me.

Julien followed its urge and moved without any warning. He sat up and snagged Will by the back of his hair and the wrist attached to the fingers that drove into him and forced Will beneath his greater weight. Will adapted to the change without question and let Julien spread his body over him as he slicked his hand and circled Will's entrance with the tips of his fingers. A little tease, a detour to the perineum where he pressed on Will's prostate from the outside first while their lips were occupied, breaths on both sides short and fast.

Julien felt the overwhelming desire to savor the moment, as if it would never happen again, and so he delayed. Descending again, he lifted Will's cock and moved it with one hand, then applied his tongue to his crevice. He was so intent on his work and Will's responses that he barely tasted the cloying flavor of the lubricant, meant to imitate something like cherry. Will's flavors were much more interesting and meant to be savored. A hunger he couldn't describe built up in him.

Will tipped his head back and moaned, a reckless, unchecked sound. It was wordless, but it was also the unformed larva of a name. The name of the specter.

Now, Julien fingered him. He inserted his index, in no rush whatsoever, despite how his own cock ached for attention. Will shifted his body with impatience, but Julien steadied him, a grip at the back of his knee where it eased up into his thigh. He gave it a firm squeeze to send a message. Will arched his back and reached up with one hand, fingers snarled into the pillowcase as he panted for release. Sweat dampened his hair and glistened between his nipples. He emitted the sweetest natural scent, a human body's smell to be sure, but something utterly rare and unexpected. It struck a sense of memory in Julien that he knew could not exist, a kind of déjà-vu soaked and dripping with bodily desire and deep, debilitating love.

He added another finger after dragging his arm over his moistened lips, and found the protrusion he was looking for within Will. And Will knew it, abandoning the pillow to grab the sheets again. It wasn't enough, so he wrapped his hand around Julien's forearm where he supported himself against the bed and squeezed hard enough to be uncomfortable. A faint voice in his head warned Julien it could leave a mark, but the words were only half-whispers and easily ignored. They were drowned out by the foreign intelligence, whose priority was holding back even as it wanted to devour Will in every sense of the word.

He brushed the prostate, gave it a few strokes of promise, then abandoned it to add a third finger. Will's frustration was palpable; he let loose a curse, growled in a needy, seductive purr.

"What do you want him to do, Will?" Even his own voice sounded different in his ears. Sounded more like his father. Baltic.

“Fuck me.” The two words were simultaneously pleading and commanding.

“Say the word I want to hear.” Julien was aware, in a vague, curtained-off part of his mind, that he had no idea what that word was.

Will knew. “ *Please* .”

Julien took his cock in hand. He had the routine so ingrained that he managed to stop and whisk a condom on before he pressed in. Even in the latex sheath, Will was hot and tight and accepting. Enveloped within him, Julien felt the strange urge to cry. It felt utterly intimate and like something he had been missing. But how could he miss something he’d never had, from a man he’s just met a couple of hours before? There was no time to question it. He let himself wallow in it, and fell into Will’s waiting arms. Julien kissed him as if he could never get enough: lips, throat, collarbone, shoulders, the delectable little area just beneath his ear. A feast that would never fulfill him, no matter how much he consumed. There would always be the hunger.

He reared back on his knees and lifted Will’s hips, dead set on the sweet spot. He caught Will under both legs and positioned the crooks of his elbows under the knees to lift and thrust again and again. Will’s sounds were tremendously satisfying; it was perfectly clear he was in the right spot. Julien’s muscles were developed for these movements and purposely exercised and conditioned for the required stamina. He fucked hard now in a practiced rhythm.

Against all logic, they came at the same time, in the same breath, the kind of coordination he’d only ever known with Maya and his former fiancé Serge. By all accounts, there was no way he could have facilitated such a perfect moment with a brand new client. Yet, it happened, and it made his heart nearly split with the joy and enchantment of it.

The immediate aftermath was a blur. When Julien returned to his senses, he was splayed out in the bed with an exhausted, sweaty Will under his arm. His only instinct was to remove the condom from his extremely sensitive anatomy, and hold Will. These things he did, and the world slid away from his vision like a droplet of water in a moving car’s window.

He slept. He woke.

Julien sat up with a soft groan and rubbed his eyes and forehead. The room smelled like coffee. Will was in the shower, the door to the washroom half-closed. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and let images from the evening run through his head. There was a terrible emptiness inside of him that he didn’t understand, only that there was an absence where something had been, and the presence itself had been heartbroken. He felt gutted. Julien had been in this business for years and he’d never felt this way after seeing a client. Something profound had happened here, but he had no idea what.

Will emerged, hair damp and black. He was half dressed already. Julien’s watch said it was almost 6am. “Morning.” His voice was quiet, but had a firmer quality than any other time he’d spoken.

Julien felt like he’d forgotten how to make words. His brain went French, then English, with a gap in between. “Good morning,” he said after a few beats. “You’re off early.”

“Yeah.” Will found his shirt on the desk chair and slipped it on, buttoning from bottom to top. “I’m gonna go see a man about a boat.”

His comment made as much sense as anything else since they’d first kissed, which was none at all, so Julien left it alone. He picked up his briefs and slipped them on, then found his phone and sent Maya a sun emoji to let her know he was awake and all right. She’d sent him some messages, but he didn’t have the time or focus to read them at the moment.

“Sugar?”

For a few seconds, Julien thought Will was addressing him using some kind of pet name. Will turned away from the desk, holding a cup of coffee from the hotel’s Keurig-style machine. “Or black?” he asked.

“Black.” Julien accepted the cup that was delivered to him. “Thank you.” The bitter sip of shitty hotel coffee further grounded him in reality, but everything still had a strange, pre-dawn, witching-hour quality.

Will tucked in his shirt and buckled his belt, then sat down to put on his socks and shoes. By that time, the second cup was done. He remained in the desk chair and stirred in two sugars with meticulous patience. “You okay?” he asked after a stretch of silence as Julien ran his hands through his hair and tried to reckon with the passion that had overtaken him the night before. Or whatever it was.

“I’m fine,” he answered, trying to keep the uncertainty from his voice. “And… you?”

“Good,” Will said after a long sip of coffee. “Really good, actually, uh… I can’t, ah, thank you enough. I’m… I feel… much *clearer* . Clearer than I have in a long time. I needed that.”

“I’m glad.”

Will took another sip of coffee, then grimaced, looking at the sludge in his cup. “I think I’m gonna take a vacation,” he said.

“Really? Where will you go?”

“Italy,” Will said. “I’m going to sail to Italy. This boat I’ve been looking at, it’s, ah… well-loved. It’s gonna need some work, but I think I can make her seaworthy.” He smiled. “Maybe I’ll name her after you.”

Without waiting for a response, Will got up and put on his coat. He crossed the room to where Julien sat on the bed and leaned in for a quick kiss, a formality. “Thanks.”

Julien nodded, and watched him put his hand on the doorknob. “Wait. The sheets?”

Will turned and smiled. It didn’t warm his eyes. They were glacier-blue and held no softness. A tremor went through Julien’s vertebrae and zigzagged over his flesh. “I don’t need them anymore.” Julien caught a tiny glimpse of the man he’d coaxed into bed the night before, all heartbreak and strife. Then it was gone.

“ *Bon voyage* ,” he heard himself say.

Will nodded goodbye, and left.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Julien exhaled a great breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. He reckoned, or tried to, with the preternatural connection and passion he’d felt the night before, and the sensation of being in some way puppeteered as he showered. Julien put on casual pants, a v-neck, and a sweater before fleeing the scene, leaving the sheets on the bed but taking the envelope of money.

Robyn was off duty, of course, but she was right about the new driver, Javier. He seemed to sense right away that Julien was tired and didn’t want to talk. He played a Canadian French-language music station, a clear gesture of support.

When he arrived home and stepped off of the elevator and into their loft, Julien realized he’d never been so glad to be home. He abandoned his coat, shoes, and suitcase and headed straight for the bed. Maya was asleep, wrapped in the fluffy white duvet. She was entirely covered, save for a spill of black braids and her hand with her phone still clasped in it. Julien eased it out of her grip and set it on the bedside table, then crawled in and pulled her close. She stirred and woke up. “There you are,” she scolded, voice syrupy with sleep and relief. “You fucking asshole.” She said this while kissing him, however.

“You were right, *mon coeur* ,” he told her. “You were right, and I’m sorry.”

“Right about what?” she pushed the duvet down to see him better.

“I did it for the excitement, like the old days. A risk I shouldn’t have taken. I should have listened to you.”

She sat up like a shot and pulled the bedclothes away to look at him, running her pale-palmed hands over his body. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

“No, no, it was fine. He didn’t hurt me. He wasn’t…”

“Julien, I swear to God, you start making sense right now!”

He took her by the wrists and pressed her rough sculptor's knuckles to his lips, kissing them several times. “I should have listened to you because you’re my wife and I love you, that’s all.”

She scoffed, then smiled. “Goddamn it, Jules.”

“It won’t happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t.”

“I promise, *mon coeur* .” She eased herself down on his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and they embraced as tightly as they could for a moment before Julien pulled the blankets up again.

“So, what was he like?”

Julien put an arm behind his head and looked up at the aerial sculpture Maya had suspended from the ceiling, a series of glass and metal balls that dangled from chains. “He lost someone close to him.” He chose each word carefully. “Someone who hurt him badly, but he still wanted to be with him, even after. Wanted him so badly it was like he was there in the room with us.”

“ *Ménage à trois* ? Did you charge extra?” She was joking, but her smile faded when his own didn’t emerge.

“He was very sad,” Julien said as he shifted his body towards her so they lay with their foreheads touching. “It made me want to rush home to you.”

“Aww, babe,” she cooed, and gave him a kiss that was gorgeous and familiar on his lips, chasing Will Graham and his sorrows away. “When you got somebody you love, you gotta hold on tight, huh?”

“I have the feeling they’ll see one another again,” Julien said, and repressed a shiver that threatened his spine

... and CUT!

Episode 4 continues, with Will purchasing the boat. Jack sees him working on it when he comes to make sure their official stories are the same. The episode ends with Will setting sail for Palermo!

Season 3 Episode 5: Contorono

Chapter Summary

Will just got yeeted off the back of the train. A storm is coming. He finds a place to spend the night and connects with Hannibal in the memory palace/dreamspace. Bedelia finally gets something she's been after.

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “Storm” by José González

“Send me your position
It's getting lonely down here
Things I've been up to lately
Have kept me from seeing clear
Why do you keep on running?
This love is fading way too fast
All the stars are burning for you
But none of them is going to last
So stop chasing the past
As soon as the storm is over
And all the fog is clear
As soon as the storm is over
I've promised to send out for you
As soon as the storm is over
As soon as the storm is over
As soon as the storm is over
As soon as the storm is over”

Because season 3 gets a bit trippy and timey-wimey, this chapter does the same. It technically begins after Chiyoh kisses Will, tells him he only understands violence as a means of persuasion, and throws him off the back of the train.

Far away, through the dark, the engine gave a desolate howl. Then it was gone. Then its echo was gone.

All Will could hear now was the insectile chittering of dry leaves in the marrow-wind. The cold breeze shifted the curls on his head. He chose to focus on this, and not the bright, insistent ache of his body and the sting of the wounds on his face.

The breeze warmed. Became breath. The stag snorted into his ear and nudged his head with its snout. *Rise* , came the silent command, the wordless compulsion following. Will felt himself drawn up as if by strings attached to his limbs, forcing him to move. He stumbled to his feet and lurched forward, following the railroad tracks.

He had to get to Florence. Had to get to Hannibal. Chiyoh was going to warn him of Will's arrival. Perhaps Hannibal would flee, concerned that Will meant his doom.

No , he thought, an immediate reaction to the notion. Hannibal was drawing him closer and closer, purposely reeling him in. And Will went, knowing what waited at the end of the line. Whatever happened, it would change him forever. Either way, he would be consumed.

Breathing heavily, exhaling a pained groan every so often, Will walked, his mind numb and determined, his body aching. Occasionally he would catch a glimpse of the stag just before it disappeared around a bend or blended into the grasping trees.

When he heard a deep, primordial rumble growing in the dark, he thought another train was coming. Will stumbled off the tracks and waited in the underbrush for the train to pass.

But nothing came. Because it was not a train; it was thunder.

He kept walking. There was nothing to be done about it. The wind gusted fiercely against the stinging wounds on his face, drying the blood on his cheeks. It wasn't long before icy drops began to fall, undulating between rain and sleet, pelting him head to toe and soaking the wool of his coat. It drenched his hair but was pleasant against his cuts and scrapes. The chill, however, made his stiffening limbs cry out for relief, any kind of warmth or mercy.

The first time he saw the dog, Will assumed it wasn't really there. Because it looked so much like…

"Bandit?" he murmured in disbelief.

The black and white dog darted in and out of shadow, moving quickly between the trees, disappearing briefly down into a gully and out of sight. Will waited, hugging his arm against his likely-broken ribs, half-expecting no further movement. Lightning flashed and Will was temporarily blinded, forced to wait for his vision to clear before looking for her again.

Thunder threatened, hot on the heels of the cracks in the sky. A savage joy clutched his heart, powerful and unexpected, as the dog crested the top of the gully and came towards him. It was not Bandit. That would have been too much miracle. Nevertheless, it was a dog, and it seemed to be headed straight for him, projecting the canine language of friendship. She was a black and white border collie mix, her fur bedraggled from the storm, feet muddy and covered with forest debris.

Will stepped over the rail and knelt in the wet gravel that flanked the train tracks. He held out a hand.

The dog came right to him after a grateful bark. She sniffed his hand, barked again, then shied away. The third time he tried to pet her she allowed it, nosing into his palm, permitting him to touch her floppy ears. She sat for a time, accepting the treatment and the soft words. When the thunder sounded again he felt her tremble. Getting to her feet, she trotted away back into the undergrowth.

Will stood. She popped her head around the trunk of a tree and barked at him. Moving a few more feet, she repeated the action.

"What's wrong, Lassie?" he asked wryly, words lost in another thunderclap. "Did, ah, Timmy fall down the well again?" Having seen every episode of the *Lassie* TV series, no small feat, Will knew that Timmy never actually fell down a well, though once, Lassie did.

The next time the lightning bisected the sky, Will caught a glimpse of the stag gliding between two trees further down the railroad tracks, a reminder of the direction he was supposed to be headed, the compass pointing toward Hannibal.

Will considered for a total of two seconds, then followed the dog.

He'd always been a believer in signs, despite the fact that they were scientifically impossible and completely incalculable. He knew the psychology; human minds were wired to look for meaning where there was none in order to explain the unexplainable. They were also trained to see patterns to a fault. Add in a little natural behavior, and you had your run-of-the-mill harbinger – certain birds meaning death and so forth.

And yet, he still clung to those little bits of superstition he'd internalized along the way. If your ears suddenly burned, someone was talking about you. Granny G had always said that if your palm itched, you were bound to come into some money. It didn't matter how many times his palm had itched and he and his father had still remained dirt poor – he still thought of it every time the sensation tickled his hand. Well, hadn't he come into some money eventually? It was gone now, but for a while, he'd been comfortable. Would have been rich if he hadn't spent so much on the dogs and paid for the house outright. Would have stayed comfortable if not for Hannibal Lecter.

He'd told Abigail once – her *imago* , anyway – that he didn't believe in God per se, but he did believe in *something* , though defining that something bordered on science fiction. After the wonder and terror and bitterness of Catholicism and his aunt's fervent, traumatizing Baptist revival, Will was deeply sure — by ten years old — that he was not Christian. But that was only a definition by negation. As an adolescent, he'd had a period of obsessive interest in polytheistic religions, and memorized entire pantheons. He still remembered so many of them, especially his favorites – jackal-headed Anubis, Xolotl of the Aztecs, the trickster Coyote, or the Babylonian goddess Gula. He had half a mind to believe that every god worshiped since the beginning of time was real in some way, manifested and given power by the believers who invented them. That power waxed and waned as civilizations rose and fell. Divine force funneled from mass hysteria and shared hallucinations.

Folie à deux.

Folie à millions.

What Will actually *believed* was uncertain, and being surrounded by believers was exhausting. It was so easy for him to be swept up in it; a symptom of his excess mirror neurons. He craved the idea of the church family, the comfort of the rituals and the promises, the simplicity of salvation. The depletion came from expending energy to prevent himself from being malleable, as Chiyoh had called him, and to remain faithful only to the universal truth he held for himself in his heart.

That truth was this: there was a great cosmic intelligence, but it was not a man in a white robe floating in the clouds. In the childhood of the world, too many elements had intersected to spark life for creation to have been an accident. But that did not mean anyone was listening to, or answering, prayers. Will felt in his core that there was a reason that the structure of atoms mirrored the structure of solar systems and universes, that spiral galaxies resembled humble snail shells. There was a reason they were all made of the same ancient carbon. But that reason, he felt, was something no human mind was capable of understanding.

That included Hannibal's mind. When he claimed that God loved church collapses, Will saw the irony, could follow Hannibal's logic and delight in his wickedness, his sacrilege. But his interpretation only rang true for the monotheistic gods created by mankind. It didn't account for the *real* old time religion. As in the beginning of time, the birth of the universe.

He thought of misinterpreted prophecies and shadow creatures with wings, mothmen with crimson eyes lurking in the West Virginia forests. There was no communication between gods and angels and humans that didn't lose something in the transmission, like a game of heaven-to-earth telephone. That was where the riddles came in, the mystery.

And yet. Signs. Portents. Harbingers. When he saw them, he believed them. He didn't act on them, didn't expect a clear result, but his first instinct was to accept their existence without question. The interpretations floated through his mind like smoke from a small but constant fire.

One crow is bad luck: they never travel alone.

Two crows for Odin, gallows-god, a lucky omen.

Three crows for a celebration, a joining, a birth, victory — the Morrigan as Babd Catha, striking fear in your enemies.

Name the bait on your hook after someone you cherish.

This superstitious instinct told him the adorable mutt was sent to him by Hecate, Goddess of the Underworld, whose favored creature was the dog. She was Our Lady of the Crossroads, and he was standing at one, wasn't he? Triple-goddess of witchcraft, torches in her hands, daggers and ropes, her coming heralded by packs of barking dogs. Secretly, she'd always been his household goddess, one from the myths of his youth that he couldn't let go.

Mother of Angels and the *anima mundi* . The world's soul.

And, all apologies to the stag, but he'd known Hecate longer.

The veil between realities seemed paper-thin. As Will followed the dog through the dense underbrush, struggling to keep up, he considered that he may have hit his head harder than he'd thought. They were deep in the countryside, and the spill of stars was so bright and cold, the skyline felt oppressive and sinisterly watchful.

Many of those stars were already dead. It was just old light.

It wasn't long before Will encountered a thicket of yew trees. The dog navigated them easily, but he had to bend to slide beneath the wall of twisted branches, holding his coat close so that it wouldn't catch. It did, of course, and the twigs and thorns pulled at him, one pressing briefly into the wound on his forehead as he passed, just to get a taste of his blood.

All at once, it was easier, the trees thinning, no longer choking his way. As he shuffled past the last of them, a clearing washed in moonlight appeared. Will stood for several moments, wiping sleet and blood out of his eye with his sleeve, just to make sure what he was seeing was real. Well, real-ish.

There was a cottage in the clearing. Not so strange, perhaps, but it was straight out of Grimm, made of weathered wood and mossy stones. The dog was next to the woodpile, where an ax rose from a stump, two pieces of split wood on either side, as if the woodcutter had stepped away moments before. Though no one would be cutting wood in this weather. The only thing splitting was the sky with more plasma-fuelled lightning, the thunder deafeningly close.

The dog waited near the woodpile, barking at him, her fur bedraggled, soaked through like Will's hair was. He could see faint firelight inside the cottage. The whole scene was surreal, but he was out of options. The wind had picked up and he was being pelted in the face with a mix of ice and rain. Will decided to approach in plain sight, hands bare and outstretched to signify he was unarmed. He was armed, of course — a wicked knife in his coat pocket, but he came in peace, if the inhabitants were also nonthreatening.

The dog trotted up and escorted him to the door. The cottage's fairytale quality eased away at this angle. There was a rusty pickup truck parked to the left of the entrance, and a broken down motorbike tucked under a lean-to. A generator sat against the side of the house, though it wasn't running.

Yet, this was still an otherworldly place. The door frame of the home was inscribed with symbols, circles and crosses intersecting. It reminded him of conjure magic down South. The weathered door was garlanded with a rope of garlic bulbs, fresh and pungent.

Will raised his hand to knock, but the dog darted forward, hopping up on her hind legs to push against the door. It creaked open, emitting warm air, fragrant with smoke, herbs, and stewing meat, all incredibly inviting. The dog slid through the opening, tail wagging, without waiting for an invitation. Well, she lived here.

If this was a fairytale, crafted to bear sorrow, every bit of common sense would urge him to turn tail and run. There was nothing for him in the witch's cottage, except the threat of being fattened up and eaten.

Then again, hadn't he been constantly under such a threat for the last two years?

Will shrugged. *So what else is new?*

He pushed the door open, knocking as he went to announce his presence as forwardly as possible.

The cottage wasn't much more than one room, dark and cluttered, jumpy with shadows. What served as a kitchen was a wood-burning stove next to a deep-basined sink with an old-fashioned spigot. There was a wooden table with four chairs, cluttered with books and papers. A fire burned in the ancient stone hearth, flanked by a strangely modern sofa, large and soft in taupe suede, like something you'd see in the den of a suburban home in the US. On the other side of the hearth, where a cast-iron pot and kettle hung over a fire, was an old woman seated in a rocking recliner that matched the sofa.

For a moment, he mistook her for a pile of clothes or blankets. But when she rocked, he noticed her gnarled hands resting on her skirt and her puckered face peeping out from beneath a brightly-colored headscarf. She had a cane at her side, and the dog sat at her feet, thumping its tail.

He put his hands up again, a universal gesture of peace. "Hello," he said.

The old woman nodded a greeting. The dog got up and came to him again, nuzzling his palm and letting him pet her wet fur.

"*Zamknij drzwi*," she said, her voice ancient, rattling like bones in a bag, and pointed at the door.

Will didn't know the words, but knew what she meant. He shut the door against the storm and flipped down the piece of wood that served as a latch. He could hear the ice pelting against it from the outside, furious to find the portal closed.

"Thank you," he said, even as she made some kind of gesture he didn't recognize, accompanied by a flipping motion. Ah. She was warding off his Evil Eye. Fair enough. He wouldn't be at all surprised to find out that having the Evil Eye was what had been wrong with him his whole life. He stood still and let himself be warded.

When she finished, the crone made a beckoning gesture. Will stripped off his dripping coat and hung it on a hook by the door next to her black shawl and a plastic poncho. Damp. She must have been outside when it started. Cutting wood? In the dark? That old woman wielding that ax?

Will toed off his shoes, which were also soaked and caked with mud and leaves. He was barefoot within, having slid them on to go look for Chiyoh. Hadn't exactly been planning to get tossed headfirst off the back of the goddamn train.

Carefully, he made his way to the sofa, helping himself to a kitchen towel from a pile folded next to the sink on the way. He used it to rub on his hair, then to press against the wounds on his face. It came away spotted with red, though the bleeding seemed to have mostly stopped. When he lowered the towel, she was staring at him with eyes that were gold-yellow and catlike in a way that suggested a forest feline, nothing domesticated. An analytical silence descended. Will gave up trying to read her expression, lost as it was in the folds of her face, and instead let himself examine the cottage more closely.

Bunches of dried herbs hung from the ceiling, along with an array of strange objects: huge old iron keys, snakeskins, unlit lanterns, and a few little human-shaped dolls made of twigs and other natural materials, not much different, he thought, than the friends Chiyoh's prisoner had made for himself out of bone and snail shells. An oil painting hung over the hearth, cracked and mold-marked, depicting a fish. The more he looked at it, the more he thought it was a red mullet. He'd never seen one venerated decoratively before.

"Mullets give birth three times a year," he said.

The old woman nodded as though she understood, magic in its own right.

The dog perked her ears up from where she'd been sitting in front of the fire, and came over to Will to nose him again. She licked his face a few times when he leaned over to pet her. When he looked at the old woman again, she was apparently asleep, her hands folded on her stomach, head tipped back, toothless mouth open, eyes closed and disappearing into her face.

Will took the damp towel and fluffed the dog's fur until it was dry, then tried to stand. His brief rest had made his damaged muscles lock up, and it took some doing. Eventually he made his way over to the kitchen and turned on the tap to drink some well-water and examine his face in the little mirror nailed to the wall. He looked like shit. *Suppose that's to be expected when you take a railroad track to the face.*

Working quietly, so as not to wake the old woman, he found a few more clean cloths and some soap. He brought them over to the hearth, along with an earthenware bowl. Wrapping the handle in a cloth, he lifted down the hot water kettle from where it hung over the fire and poured a steaming bowl. The dog watched him as he cleaned his face, hands, and feet. A quick glance and a snore told him the old woman was still asleep. Will stripped off his shirt and rubbed the wet cloth over his neck and shoulders, then unzipped his pants, hanging them on a little drying rack by the fireplace.

When he glanced up again, he saw the old woman's eyes were open, and there was an amused grin on her face, showing off the few teeth she had left.

He smiled back, letting out a rueful chuckle as he folded the damp towel over the drying rack as well.

" *Ubrania mojego męża.* " She lifted one finger towards the little door in the corner. Will stood and opened it, revealing a small, dark bedroom that was dusty with disuse, the air stale. In a wardrobe, Will found men's clothing preserved in cedar-lined drawers. He pulled on a white shirt and buttoned it, rolling up the sleeves. The trousers fit him in the hips, but were almost comically too short, patched in the knees. He felt like he was dressed up as Huck

Finn. Still, they were warm and dry, though easing his aching body into the garments was painful.

When he emerged from the bedroom, she had gotten up from her seat and moved to the table. There, she worked a mortar and pestle, making a kind of herb paste infused with warm water. Will also found a cup of tea sitting on the arm of the sofa, clearly meant for him. It tasted bitter and medicinal, but he finished it quickly.

She beckoned him over, and he came, kneeling on the floor when she pointed to it. Dipping her weathered fingers into the bowl, she gently applied the mixture to the wounds on his face, where it dried quickly, emitting a clean, earthy scent.

When she'd finished, he held out his hand, and she took it, accepting his help getting to her feet. "Śpij," she ordered, pointing at the bedroom, before shuffling over to the chair and sinking back into it, closing her eyes.

Will didn't need to be told twice. He collapsed onto the old bed and stretched out, despite its creaks and squeaks, pulling up the careworn quilt. Whatever had been in the tea was taking the edge off of his pain, easing him into sleep.

And encouraging him to dream.

As if he had merely blinked, Will stands before the angel fountain in the gardens of Castle Lecter, wrapped in the gloaming, surrounded by fireflies. He looks down at his hand. It is clasped in someone else's. That someone raises it to their lips and kisses it. It is Hannibal. A firefly lands on his shoulder for a moment, pulsing, before it flies away again.

"I've never seen so many," Will says. "Even in the swamps back in Louisiana. It's… marvelous."

"Inspiring marvel."

Will nods. "How?"

"Cochlear gardens attract fireflies. Their larvae devour many times their own body weight in snails. Fuel to power a transformation into a delicate creature of such beauty." He skims the backs of his fingers over Will's cheek, thumbs the little hollow beneath his bottom lip.

"Burn bright, but just for two moons."

Hannibal leans in and presses his lips against Will's, the whisper of a kiss. "Better to live true to yourself for an instant than never know it."

"Even if knowing yourself requires so many sacrifices? So many pounds of flesh?" Despite his question, Will melts into his arms willingly.

"Especially then. Savor the knowing, knowing the price was dearly paid."

Will bends and picks up an empty snail shell from the base of the fountain and offers it to Hannibal on his palm. "The sacred spiral," he says. "The double helix, a shell, a

fingerprint… a hurricane, a universe."

"Microcosm to macrocosm." Hannibal lifts the shell between two long fingers to examine it more closely.

"Harmony. The infinite. The spiral arms of our galaxy." Will turns to the heavens, where he can easily see the undulating tentacles made of stars. "You're rearing things that eat galaxies, Hannibal. They consume the cosmos, sacrifice it to their young. To fuel… the change."

"Your change, Will." Hannibal crushes the shell in his hand and shows Will the delicate shards. "Billions of voices silenced to bring you your wings."

"Chaos," Will whispers into his lips just before they touch.

"Freedom," Hannibal corrects him after they part.

Will pulls away. "I elevated him. The man that killed your sister. For you."

"There are places here I cannot safely go," Hannibal says.

"But I want to show you. Chiyoh provided the, ah… raw materials," Will says. He takes Hannibal's hand again and draws him toward the dungeon entrance. "But first…" He puts a hand in his pocket and pulls out a length of deep red fabric, a soft, satiny thing that slips easily over his fingers.

"I've learned to be wary of your surprises, Will," Hannibal says, but makes no move to resist.

Will steps behind Hannibal in a swift movement, and sneaks the silk around his neck, pulling it taut for a long moment before easing it up over his eyes, plunging Hannibal's world into satin darkness. He ties it tightly. "Can you see anything?"

Hannibal's lip curls and one edge of his mouth twitches up in a playful piece of a smile. "No," he says.

***

I am telling the truth. I am blinded.

"Are you sure?" Will's voice comes from the other side now. I turn my head, but the warm, smooth lips are against my neck on the other side — just the press of a kiss before they are gone. This is ill-advised. Fatally, perhaps. But I love it when Will is like this, scheming and unpredictable.

"I can't see anything."

Will's hands slide into mine, and he guides me forward. I hear the door open, feel the narrow frame brush my shoulders. "Duck your head a bit — there. All right, keep going." Will steadies me against some uneven flooring, then down a length of stone stairs. The air is stale,

permeated with the unmistakable earthly scent of subterranean rooms, stone walls, and mossy floors. There is also the sweet rot of death. I can hear ropes creaking, and the buzzing of flies, smell puddles of spilled wine and violence, and the faint lotus of Chiyoh.

Will stops me. I lift a hand to push up the blindfold, but Will catches my wrist, his grip unwavering, vise-like. "Not yet, mylima," he murmurs. "I'll tell you when."

I smile and lifted my other hand in playful spite. Will snags this wrist as well, and presses the two together. I tease him by trying to pull away, but I am not committed to my endeavor.

I hear a metallic clanking sound, and feel the unmistakable pinch of it against my skin, digging into my wrists and hands. Then a snap that can only be a padlock closing. I am far too curious to stop what Will has begun. It thrills me to live in the liminal space of his intentions; as infuriating as his indecision has always been, there is something wholly seductive about his unpredictability.

Will releases me entirely and I stumble at the sudden absence. His velvet fingers trace up the side of my throat, behind my ear, and then he eases down the blindfold. The space is dim, lit only by a few candles. It is where Chiyoh has kept her prisoner all this time, and where my father kept his wine. Somehow, bottles remain. The government must have never investigated this particular part of the castle when they turned our living quarters into a state-run orphanage.

Vladis Grutas hangs by ropes from the ceiling, his hands bound in prayer position, the rest of his body wrapped to create the shape of an insect-like thorax and abdomen. Will has used all of the mechanical skills at his disposal, and his vision, to create this design for me. The candlelight shimmers like a thousand emeralds through the shattered glass of the fashioned wings, an imago ready to emerge as a full-fledged adult. Liquefied, reassembled, and now complete.

It is Will's design, but not Will's victim. Because this creation isn't about him, except that he made it for me. It is a monument to my own becoming, a transformation that began on these very grounds decades ago.

It is beautiful.

"Will." I invoke him like an ancient deity. His creation has taken away my ability to be coherent. Will stands beside me, pale skin lovely and perfect in the flickering light, his hair backlit, face full of shadow. His eyes cut through the dim, fiercely alight, lips parted just enough to reveal the slash of his teeth. Will reaches out and puts his hands gently on the delicate-looking but unyielding silver chains he's wound around my crossed wrists, again and again, excruciatingly tight and locked in place.

"Look up," he whispers. "Above you."

I crane my neck back to see a hook screwed into the thickest beam of the ceiling. There is a heavy rope connecting my chains to it, the other end clasped in Will's hands. He begins to pull, intending to stretch my arms over my head. I wait for the right moment and slip my bound arms around Will, catching him against the small of his back and pressing our hips

together, pinning his arms to his sides. Temporarily of course. All Will has to do is keep pulling; he has the range of motion, elbows free. But he obliges for the moment.

"Caught you," I taunt softly. "What's it to be, Will? You still haven't made up your mind."

Will's hand snakes up and catches my chin as I try to lean in for a kiss. "I won't know until I know," he murmurs, bringing our lips closer and closer together, though never touching. "Did you ever think that maybe… I don't want to silence those voices? Make the necessary sacrifices? That it's not worth it, just to, ah… shine my light?" The hand slips away from my chin and closes around my throat, squeezing enough that my blood pounds in my temples and my breath struggles through my rapidly-diminishing windpipe. "Up. Now."

I lift my arms and he lets me go, stepping away to pull the rope. He raises my arms high enough to leave me entirely prone, but not so high that I have to stand on tiptoe. Will retreats, surveys his handiwork, toying with what is probably the key to the padlock, which he'd hung on a bit of string. He slips it over his head and tucks it beneath his shirt, then crosses one arm over his chest, the other against his lips in thought. "I'm dying to hear what you think," he says, inching closer, then maneuvering behind me in such a way that I can only see him out of the corner of my eye. "I hope you think he's a fitting tribute."

"It's exquisite beyond words, Will," I praise him, shivering as Will pulls the piece of satin across my throat again. It is cool heaven on the bruised flesh and swollen welts left by Will's powerful grip. "I have the perfect place for it in my memory palace."

"The design isn't finished." Will's lips are on the back of my ear, the silk pulled taut across my throat. "All our endings can be found in our beginnings, Hannibal. I've made a place for you in my world."

"Do you think you can do it this time, Will?" I suck in a breath and bite my lip as Will arches his arm around me and stimulates me through my clothing. My body responds with very little coaxing. "You realize you've squandered every chance you've ever had to kill me," I manage to say under my breath as quicksilver desire floods through every vein, artery, capillary, chemicals saturating my brain, adrenaline activating my innate danger response. But I cannot fight or flee, not bound like this.

Will releases me, save the hand that holds the cloth around my neck. He twists it painfully tight again, cutting off my air long enough to reach around and free the button and zipper of my trousers, sneaking his hand inside. The increase in pressure causes photopsia. I tremble at his touch as my vision feathers black, my world threaded through with flakes of silver that make the candlelight and the broken glass wings all the more ethereal. He continues to pleasure me with his hand, attending to my every response, his work keen and relentless. I feel his body pressed against mine from behind, and I feel him pushing against my backside, unable to stop his own arousal. Even in this state, I can control him if I choose. Just as I can fall victim to him, even if I have him tied up and at my mercy.

As in all things, we are uroboros. A sacred circle, not a spiral.

The second I became convinced that yes, Will really means to choke me into unconsciousness, the ligature releases, and I take a full lungful of air. Simultaneously, Will's hand movement

peaks in its efficiency and I climax, hard. Harder than I have in a long, long time, and the orgasm flows in layers, peeling back one at a time to reveal a deeper, more satisfying sensation. I cannot stop myself from crying out, but as the moan crests the back of my tongue, Will's hand, wound in the satin cloth, clamps over my mouth, muffling it almost entirely. Will is locked around me now, pressed so tight I feel I could break from the pressure of the hand over my mouth, tilting my head back, the other crushed against my stomach.

The hook's bolts that keep it anchored in the thick oaken beam overhead groan loudly, and a few of them come free in a shower of dust and splinters. "Easy now." Will releases me one inch at a time, leaving me with quivering legs and shallow, gasping breaths. "You've left me no choice. This is such a peaceful place – we shouldn't disturb it, especially with, ah… screaming." Will's cool breath caresses the back of my ear again, the lips brushing the back of my left lobe ever so slightly. The cloth winds around my neck again, but creeps up until it covers my lips. I open my mouth instinctively and the gag slides into place between my teeth. The strip of cloth is long enough that Will loops it around another time, covering my mouth entirely, and fastening it behind my head to the point of discomfort.

At last, Will returns to my view, tracing his fingers along the place where my waistband meets my skin until we stand face to face. I twist my wrists in the chains, but I cannot move them. I strain against the metal, but give up when Will distracts me with other things, such as tearing open my shirt in a single motion, the garment falling in tatters to either side, buttons skittering across the floor like pearlescent beetles.

Will thumbs my nipple, tracing its circumference, tracking its hardness, then puts his other hand behind my neck. Rising up on his toes, he kisses the cloth gag where my mouth should be, letting a quiet laugh slide out as he pulls away to drift his lips under my chin and work them down along my throat instead.

Will's hands on my back are cold where he sneaks them up beneath my ruined shirt. I realize it is not only his hands I feel, but a blade clutched in his right hand, and he teases me with its edge. My flesh quivers as the knife presses into me, to the side of L1, first gently, then with more force, and then hard enough that I can feel blood trickle down my spine and into the upper band of my undergarment. It sends thrumming waves of sensation through me, the pain crisp and immediate and somehow also pleasurable; I cry out again, though it is muffled almost entirely by the gag. I do not, on principle, find enjoyment in receiving pain of this magnitude, but I am consumed with the pleasure of knowing Will has finally put his blade in my flesh after so many opportunities when he held himself back.

Will brings his hand to my chest, tracing his fingertips along the collarbone, his other arm locked around my waist, pressing his body into mine. Then comes the wicked little knife again, biting into the pectoral and dragging down. I strain against the chains and ropes, and more bolts come out of the hook, which is getting looser by the minute. Will licks the bleeding mark on my chest slowly, teasing at my nipple with his tongue as his hand travels down between my legs again, finding me ready once more.

I am curious what will happen next. I am not sure if it is part of Will's original design or not, but he seems unable to stop himself from getting on his knees and pulling me free and into his mouth for vigorous fellatio, bloody knife still in one hand, pressed against my hip. He draws

me in deeply, tonguing my underside and then pressing the tip of the wet muscle into the slit. I feel the side of his teeth and the warmth of his mouth acutely, my desire almost as agonizing as the knife wound on my back.

The gag might muffle the noise of my second climax, but the ancient ceiling hook gives up. Will takes us all the way to the floor, lying stretched out over my prone body, one hand holding the bundle of chain above my head. I permit this.

"Hannibal," he whispers, shaking his head in chastisement, "this is why we can't have nice things."

My laugh is lost in the fabric of the gag.

He sits on my hips, lifting the knife to my throat. I try to grab his hands, but he pins my bound wrists against the floor again. "History repeats itself," he vows. "I'll kill you here, where you began. And I'll kill you again, in Florence, where you became a man. Where you became Il Mostro. Full circle."

Will raises the knife to my throat, and prepares to open me.

But this is a dream, like the one I had about the bower of bones, and while I can't guarantee that I am in complete control, I have my influence. Will's vision has been spectacularly powerful up until now – aided somehow, by some kind of unknowable power outside of himself. But it is slipping as he grapples with his decision. "Our Lady of the Crossroads," I say into the gag, though I don't know why.

Will tenses to slit my throat, already anticipating the arterial spray. But the knife in his hand disintegrates in his grasp, and becomes a swarm of fireflies that buzz lazily away until he holds nothing. He stares down at me in unabashed disbelief. "How did you do that?"

The same way I do this.

Now the chains around my arms are made of flowers, and I tear through them easily, tossing Will to the side and grappling him until I sit astride his hips with his arms locked at his ribs, my hands around his throat. The gag is gone, too, having evaporated like mist. My mouth is free to say, "You wanted to surprise me. And I want to surprise you."

***

Will sat up so fast in bed that his spine cracked audibly in several places. He stumbled to his feet, the borrowed shirt sticking to him with sweat. He took a moment to rest his head against the cool, dusty glass of the cottage's window and breathe. It was still dark.

The feeling of the dream attacked his insides. The room felt suddenly stifling to him. Clouds imposed themselves over the rays of moonlight that filtered through the forest, and the sleet had turned into a steady rain that fell straight down, the wind surprisingly calm. Without knowing what he was doing, or why, Will left the little bedroom barefoot. The old woman and the dog were nowhere to be seen, but the door to the cottage was wide open. Torches

anchored into the muddy ground burned on either side of the doorway, spitting and hissing in the rain. He passed between them and out into the sodden dark.

Will couldn't seem to catch his breath, his body still quaking with the images he'd seen behind his eyes, the bestial desire mired in a killing instinct that still burned in him. He let the rain soak him completely and focused on the primordial shadows that leapt and danced through the trees in the torchlight.

He lost track of time, mind and flesh burning.

A hand touched his shoulder.

Will realizes he is on his knees in the sodden grass, his clothes sticking to him, his flimsy white shirt gone see-through. He raises his head slowly and looks up to see Hannibal standing at his side.

Impossible. Hannibal is in Florence. This is Poland, middle of nowhere.

And yet.

Hannibal takes him by the arm and guides him to his feet, then smoothes his soaked hair, black with moisture, back from his forehead.

Will suffers a wave of strange relief that washes over him as the rain does. Hannibal lives.

He falls on Hannibal without another word, working their lips together, snaking his tongue between, a taste of blood, no matter, his hands locked on either side of Hannibal's head. Hannibal's muffled moan of pleasure spurs him on, and he lifts Will easily, pressing his back into the mossy stones of the cottage's garden wall.

Hannibal tears his lips away and bites him, a quick but savage penetration that leaves blood flowing down over his collarbone, mixing with the rain as it darkens the neckline of his shirt. Will cries out reflexively, but the sound cuts off as Hannibal buries their mouths together again in a crimson kiss that is all copper and heat. He wriggles out of Hannibal's grasp and shifts his weight to push off the wall, sending them both tumbling to the sodden ground.

Hannibal pins him down, his wet hair tangling against either side of his finely-cut face. "What's gotten into you, my lamb?" he asks, his face a mix of desire and bemusement.

Lamb. Sacrifice. A cosmos silenced to feed me as I grow.

Will catches him off guard and manages to flip them over; Hannibal lands hard on his back. Without hesitation. Will lowers his head and bites the satiny flesh of his throat, just below the corner of his jaw. He doesn't break the skin, but Hannibal goes rigid beneath him and gasps out his name. Hannibal catches him by the hair and wrenches his head back. The bite hasn't drawn blood, but left the unmistakable outline of Will's teeth, ringed with deep bruises.

"Hungry, Will?" Hannibal smirks, eyes alight. "Why didn't you say so? All you had to do was ask. I'm always happy to feed you. Fine food demands fine company."

Will wraps his lips around the wound he'd made and sucks at it, bringing blood to the surface, his actions clumsy compared to Hannibal's expert bite. Hannibal relaxes his body, giving up the struggle, and runs the fingers of one hand through Will's tangled hair, the other stroking him between the legs.

Hannibal's blood is warm, thick, simultaneously sweetly metallic and gamey, like the essence of organ meat. He can feel it slithering down his throat and into his stomach.

"I'm inside you, Will. I'll always be here, even if you kill me," Hannibal's whisper caresses his ear.

"This isn't real," Will mutters through bloody lips. "This isn't real…"

"What is reality if not what we perceive?"

Endless black.

***

The clank of metal sounds like little bells ringing. Will rolls onto his back with a soft groan, accompanied by the ringing sound. He puts a hand to his forehead and feels the cold snake of metal across his bare chest. Sitting up, he opens his eyes, even though he doesn't want to. He smells the decomposition of the prisoner's body, and the sourness of spilled wine. Somehow, he's been transported back to the dungeon of Castle Lecter. Glancing up, he sees the raw place in the wood where the hook he'd hung Hannibal from broke free, allowing him to escape Will's design.

But that had been a dream. He'd woken up in Poland, in the old woman's cottage. How the hell was he back here?

Now, however, there are new additions to the space. Thick iron rings driven into the stone walls on either side and reinforced with fresh concrete, rebar, and metal spikes distributing the pressure points. Another beam added to the ceiling, this one metal, and affixed to it is some kind of crank with a handle that stretches down far enough for an adult-sized person to comfortably turn it from a standing position.

Will looks at his hands. His wrists have been fitted with irons that go halfway to his elbow, much too long to effectively dislocate his thumb and pull his arm through without considerable damage. They are fixed with bolts, which he tries to unscrew, but can't get a good enough grip. These are attached to chains that go to the rings on either side of the room, and then up to the crank on the ceiling. He tries standing, but finds another, smaller chain around his waist that is wrapped around his feet, allowing him only to kneel.

Nearby, the prisoner's body sways gently, accompanied by the groan of ropes and the twinkle of broken glass.

The door opens somewhere far above, and careful, measured steps ring against the mossy stone staircase. Hannibal appears freshly dressed in another of his suits, this one brown

tweed, with an immaculate white shirt beneath, the collar starched, pristine. He regards Will with a loving but dangerous expression, a secret smile. "Hello, Will."

"How did you – how are you doing this?" Will's breaths are short, frantic. "Is this real?"

Hannibal's smile deepens as he slides his hands into his pockets. "Dreaming prepares us for waking life. Would it surprise you that I control my dreams just as carefully as I do my daytime world?" He raises a pale brow. "And what an interesting effect it had on you. Now I know where you are."

Will grips his knees where he kneels on the cold stone floor. "This doesn't change anything. I'm still coming to Florence."

"I'd be disappointed if you changed course." Hannibal puts his shoulder against the wall and folds his arms. "Tell me how it feels to be so unpredictable that you don't know — even within your own mind — what you'll do when the time comes."

As he speaks, Hannibal, in absolutely no hurry, turns the chain crank a few links at a time. It draws Will's hands away from his body, stretching them out to either side until he is nearly at his full wingspan, though still able to bend his elbows slightly. "It's infuriating," Will admits. "It's weakness."

Hannibal ducks under the now-taut chain and moves behind him. Will cranes his neck to watch him. He kneels behind Will and touches his neck gently, running his fingers over the sensitive skin. "Keep going."

"Chiyoh called me malleable. And she's right. That's why I have to fight you. Otherwise I'm just… clay for someone else to shape."

"Pygmalion fell in love with his sculpture, and Aphrodite breathed life into her." Hannibal spreads his cool hands around Will's waist, sliding one up to rest just above his heart. Lips against his shoulder, gentle, then with a little more force. Hannibal presses his face into the back of Will's head and neck, his breath tickling the side of his ear. "Tell me, Will – when can a weakness be a strength?"

Will feels a betraying flush rise to his face in response to Hannibal's touches. "When it saves lives," he insists, stubbornly tamping down his desire. "I'm supposed to use this-this thing I have to catch murderers, not become one."

"Not to fall in love," the velvet voice adds from behind him, Hannibal's hand stealing down to loosen the button on his mud-stained pants, the fabric still flecked with blades of grass.

"That's a weakness," Will insists, "my weakness, when it comes to you."

"I want to hear you say it."

Will hesitates.

Fingers around his throat, a caress, then a firm squeeze. "Tell me."

Will inhales a shaky breath. "I love you." He moistens his lower lip again and looks to the heavens for guidance. All he sees is the stone ceiling of the dungeon, dripping with viscous water, hanging with weeds.

"You love me," Hannibal confirms, his voice strange, unreadable.

"Yes," Will says. No hesitation.

"Hmm." Hannibal's intonation seems genuinely intrigued.

"You know that," Will says, shifting in his chains. "You've, ah, accounted for it in your… calculations, haven't you?"

Hannibal is quiet for a moment. "I have," he says. "When I can. When I am allowed."

"But you couldn't account for how you felt," Will says as Hannibal's fingertips run lightly over the back of his neck. "That's your weakness."

"Will," Hannibal whispers, voice threaded with disbelief as he reverses the question toward himself this time. "When can a weakness be a strength?"

Will sighs, feeling Hannibal's hair brush the side of his face. "That's something you're going to have to figure out," he says before he can check himself. "And I would be lying if I said I wanted you to stop."

"It seems I have some personal reflection ahead of me." Hannibal smiles against his shoulder, and kisses it again.

"How does that make you feel?" Will challenges with a wry smile, using his best therapy voice. Then he exhales a plea as Hannibal reaches down his pants, touching him with his cool, smooth fingers.

"Alive," Hannibal says softly. "Adoring you for what you've given me. What you've shared. Willingly. And, if I'm being honest, simultaneous terror." The last word dissolves into Will's little helpless moan as Hannibal strokes him.

Hannibal suddenly releases him entirely, stands, and comes around to face him, a saint's smile on his face. "God himself could not have loved Adam more than I love you." He kneels in front of Will and puts a hand on his thigh, the other tracing his blood-and-grime smeared cheek with the tenderest touch. Hannibal kisses him gently, then releases his lips, but remains so close that they nearly touch again as he speaks, his words flowing into Will's mouth like his tongue might. "I've dreamt more since meeting you than I have in years. I dream of having been born human. Dark figures lead me to a forest clearing not far from this castle. I am swathed in red. They compel me to wait on a boulder covered in furs. They call it an altar. I watch them meld into the trees. I wait, terrified of what's to come. I sense I'm being watched. I turn, and there you are, Will, all pale skin and fierce eyes — blue eyes, hard like cut sapphires — and you come to me, as if I'd been placed there for you."

"A sacrifice," Will whispers, and Hannibal nods.

“You are alluring, a beautiful predator, too lovely to be refused. Too late I realize what you are, but even then, I never really want to escape. In the dream, I want you to consume me. I want to nourish you with my life and all else I have to offer.” He stands and takes a few steps back, crossing his arms over his chest. “Which is, I think, how you’ve always felt about me.”

“It is,” Will says, and realizes he means it.

“And you — with your extra neurons, you must feel everything that I do when I kill. Except the guilt of your own manufacturing. Consider how you feel every time you think about killing. Do you feel the current of unspeakable joy? I have felt it many times, Will. But with you, I can feel it without killing. I feel it when I love you. When I love what you’ll become.”

Will feels a slow smile spread over his face. “That’s how I make you feel?”

“Yes, Will. Every night.” He motions to the chains and the crank. “I know we play our games of cat and mouse, or mouse and cat,” he indicates them each in turn, “but you are my treasure, Will.”

“I’d give you a kiss, but, ah…” Will rattles the chains. “I know I was a little out of sorts earlier, but you can let me out now.”

Hannibal laughs outright, showing teeth. “A valiant effort. Alas, no, I’m not finished with you yet.”

“You’re not?”

“The night is young.” Hannibal ducks the chain and stands behind him again. Will flinches and shivers as cool silk touches his skin. The sinfully red cloth gag is now between his teeth and then over his lips. Then, another long piece, this one black, covers his eyes. His view plunges into darkness. He hears Hannibal stand, his shoes scraping the floor, and then the unmistakable noise of the chain crank. Hannibal lets out slack until Will can drop his hands to his sides. He reaches out to where he is sure Hannibal is, and grasps nothing but air. Hannibal’s hand winds around his throat and pushes him on the ground, easy enough as Will’s feet are chained to the links of his waist by a short leash. The hand on his throat holds him steady as Hannibal pulls down his clothing just enough.

“Keep still,” Hannibal warns him. “Very still.” Warm lips close around him and Will moans softly into the gag. It is too much pleasure in the wake of too much truth, a beautiful distraction from the hard facts of mutually assured destruction. It isn’t long, though, before Will stops worrying and learns to love the bomb, especially when Hannibal swirls his tongue like that. He has the lack of gag reflex of a man who enjoys eating live octopus, which Will knows he’s done – Hannibal told him about a trip to Korea as part of an exchange through Johns Hopkins. Even if he wasn’t blindfolded, he wouldn’t be able to see straight. Will has to stop himself from moving his hips and pressing in entirely, arching his back against the damp, mossy floor. His hand finds its way to Hannibal’s hair, arm trailing the chain across the floor, the sound a ghost would make. Hannibal finds his other hand and holds it with warm, affectionate firmness. He doesn’t let up the pressure until Will has spent entirely, then eases his mouth free, a purely tender motion.

When he's finished reeling from the cascade of pleasure, Will realizes Hannibal is no longer touching him, and has tucked and buttoned him back up. "Hannibal?" he breathes.

The crank begins again, so swiftly that the manacles on his arms yank him up to his knees so hard he gasps, fiery pain shooting through his shoulder sockets. Hannibal against him now, an arm around the small of his back, drawing him close. His teeth graze Will's throat, poised, it feels, to bite, but then he pulls back, releasing Will entirely. The chains crank down, and Hannibal unlocks his legs, unscrews the bolts and frees his arms. Will gets shakily to his feet, and slowly raises his hands to remove his blindfold and gag, letting them fall to the floor.

Hannibal stands by the staircase that leads back to the castle grounds, back to fireflies and snails, cosmos-eaters and eldritch horrors, his dark eyes shining. "Come to me of your own power, Will."

Will doesn't hesitate, and melts into his arms. Weakness. Hannibal gazes at him with unadulterated affection and a tender smile, then takes him by the chin and tilts his head to the side. He moves slowly, giving Will several seconds to pull away. Will places a hand on the back of Hannibal's head, and draws them together instead.

"I love you," Will says stubbornly. Strength.

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I wake up.

This is Florence. I can hear the bells ringing. I close my eyes and listen to them, trying to pick out where each one is coming from. Santa Maria Novella. Santa Maria Maggiore. Santa Maria del Fiore. Basilica de Santa Trinita. San Salvatore. Santa Maria Novella again.

Another dream that was not a dream. I cannot account for it. I make a note to research remote viewing, see if there is any evidence that such a thing could exist. That I dreamwalk with Will at night.

When he comes, I'll have to ask him if he spent a night in an old woman's cottage in rural Poland. I am deeply curious if it is true. I don't know what I will think if he says yes. I wonder what he will think when I tell him I knew where he was that evening.

I speculate how long ago he spent the night there, or if he hasn't done so yet. If miles can be folded between our minds, days could just as easily. I may have traveled not only through space, but time as well. I smile, because Will was not able to overcome my lucid dreaming. He showed a distinct lack of focus.

While I am thinking about remote viewing and time travel, Bedelia wakes up, stirring against my side. I imagine she cannot help but notice my physical state, which is very obvious through the light sheet and blanket we have thrown over us. She sees her opportunity and touches me, and I let her. I permit her use of me, which pleases her immensely, from what I can observe lying beneath her. Never mind that the reason I woke up in such a state was because of Will, and I'd honestly forgotten she was in the bed next to me. I appreciate the release.

She is in rare spirits for the rest of the day. There is no reproach, no scolding, and she does not treat me like her patient. We do not dress, and instead spend the Sunday hours eating escargot and drinking wine, talking, remaining in our nightclothes until late afternoon. I play the piano for her.

Bedelia has no reservations about consuming the cosmos. She never saw the sacred spiral on these snails' shells; she only knows the meat within, juicy and tender, fed to her on a silver skewer by my hand.

When she told Antony Dimmond that I was particular about the way she tastes, she was not wrong. What she doesn't know is that I hope that Will will be pleased with how I've prepared her. That he can taste the months of loving care I have devoted to her flavor.

I think she will make a lovely coming-home dinner. Will's palate is progressing nicely, and I have no doubt he will appreciate my hard work.

Then again, perhaps I will improve Bedelia's flavor by feeding her parts of Will, the ones I haven't selected for myself. I assure myself that, despite my love for him, I can follow through if this is the fate Will chooses for himself. I've promised my own heart that I *will* eat him if he betrays me once more. And I keep my promises.

Who's to say? My darling Will is entirely unpredictable.

Either way, it will be interesting, and very, very far from maddeningly polite.

Season 3 Episode 6: Dolce

Chapter Summary

Will finds Hannibal sitting in front of La Primavera, and the scene plays out as it did in the show. But the part that was cut out happens at the gallery before they leave and Will pulls out his "forgiveness"...

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “Let It Be” – Blackmill feat. Veela

“All she's got is the way he looks
Many miles on the other side
He had overheard her choice
And he delved off her cliffside
Sacrifice he just wants to help
Holds the world like a baby
Takes his mask off and lulls his head
Then she sees him in the screen
They both see the traps
No fool, oh oh
They won't go back
No fool, oh oh
They've got a mind track
No fool, Oh oh
It's all a mystery
Let it come and let it be
Oh oh
They both see the traps
No fool, h oh
They won't go back
No fool, oh oh
They've got a mind track
No fool, oh oh
It's all a mystery
Let it come and let it be
Let it come and let it be
Let it come and let it be
Let it come and let it be”

This scene takes place immediately following the Primavera reunion scene and before Will and Hannibal step out into the piazza.

“After you,” Will said. The weight of the knife in his pocket was equal parts gift and burden. It was simultaneously a holy avenger — a monster-slaying Excalibur, handed directly to him by a Lady of the Lake — and a cursed thing, a sacrificial dagger laden with a thousand wordless sorrows. In his hand, it could be either.

You had him, Jack. He was beaten. Why didn’t you kill him?

Maybe I needed you to do it.

In that moment, it sounded to Will like a cacophony of intertwined voices came from Jack’s mouth in chorus, as though he was a man possessed by legion. Those five words, uttered simultaneously by every victim Hannibal had ever claimed — the faceless mass of strangers, and voices he recognized. He heard those he mourned less or not at all: Abel Gideon, Dr. Sutcliffe, Judge Davies. And those whose absence he carried with him like a perpetual wound, the soul equivalent of a barren landscape, a village razed, the earth salted: Abigail. Georgia. Beverly.

This was their last chance for a reckoning. Because Will was sure that if he left Florence with Hannibal, it was over. He wouldn’t be able to fight him anymore. There would be no more conflict within. His becoming would be complete and he would be at Hannibal’s side for the rest of his life, his lover and his acolyte, complicit in every murder stretching backward and forward in time.

Though, the more he thought about it, that guilt, that shared complicity, was a price he would consider paying to know himself and to know the sweet and easy peace of being in love with a monster. With *his* monster. The monster they both were, conjoined.

Hannibal took his invitation and stepped deliberately in front of him, his back to Will, unguarded. It was a test.

Will passed. The knife stayed in his pocket.

Hannibal paused at the door next to the portraits, waiting. Will stepped closer, very aware that each was trying to read the other’s expression.

Hannibal broke first. His expression softened back to the way he’d looked when Will had first walked into the gallery and sat next to him. “I’ll have to tell Chiyoh not to drop you on your face next time,” he joked softly, raising a hand to Will’s forehead to brush the hair aside, away from the wounds left by his impact with the railroad ties.

“And, ah, I’ll tell Jack to stick to body blows,” Will said through a pained smile.

Hannibal let the hand drop to rest on his shoulder. It rose again to fold around the side of Will’s face, thumb stroking gently on his scraped cheek. Hannibal kissed him, once, twice.

The third was the deepest. The change in Hannibal's breathing was blatant, a small hitch in his inhale as he leaned in one more time before letting Will go.

That tiny catch in Hannibal's air felt exactly like being gutted by his knife. Instead of blood spilling out, it was Will's liquid sorrow, viscous and black, cold instead of life-hot.

"Why those two?" Will cast a glance back at *La Primavera* . "The wind god and the nymph with the roses on her mouth?"

Hannibal smiled, exhaling a faint sigh as he gazed back at the painting with obvious longing…

…I consider Will's question. "Certainly there is much to love about how Botticelli depicted Mercury, farthest to the left. He resembles you, Will."

Will chuckles softly. He doesn't see the resemblance, of course, beyond, perhaps, the textured dark hair. There are other times when I've sat in this gallery and drawn Will's features instead of the ones inspired by a Medici. Who could resist depicting him in this way, one arm raised to pluck an orange, the other resting on his cocked hip in a posture so mundane yet deeply sensual, swathed in a flowing red tunic slit so high up the thigh? And he is armed with a blade, as my Will likely is at this very moment. I wait for that thought to bring any kind of adrenal response in my brain, but it does not. I should not trust him. But Bella Crawford was correct when she told me that at times, forgiveness is a reflex. I battle against it. It gets in the way of my thinking.

"I've always been drawn to the figures of Zephyrus and Chloris, ever since I was a young man," I tell him as we linger in the doorway. "Zephyrus, the west wind, represents the bluster of March. He captures Chloris and transforms her into Flora, goddess of the flowers; as she talks, her lips breathe spring roses. Her change is brought about through his love."

"Even though he had to kidnap her first?"

I want to touch Will. I'm desperate to do so, but feel restrained by time and the echoes of footsteps in the gallery halls. I settle for sliding my hand beneath his palm and resting it there. He curls his fingers around my hand before I release my hold. "Some resist change," I say, looking directly into Will's Aegean eyes. He nods. He knows.

Do you believe you could change me, the way I changed you?

I already did.

At the time, in that blood-soaked moment, I did not see how that was possible. I am now in a place of deeper understanding, denial cast aside.

Will is right. Neither of us will ever be the same. We are conjoined, and we share vital organs. Perhaps one could be carved free of the other, the essential systems reattached, skin

grafted and growing, condemning to death the weaker of the pair. But it is equally possible that we will both die.

The question remains whether each of us is willing to take that risk. If the chance for freedom is worth the possible dual destruction.

I know Will is capable of bringing about great transformation in others even as he resists his own. That is why I cast him as Zephyrus. For what is Will if not the bitterly changeable March wind, blowing the frigid remains of winter in my face one day, and bringing the sweet warmth of spring the next? I have no doubt he would be capable of taking Bedelia and transforming her, elevating her, as he once said, to art. He influenced Chiyoh, indomitable Chiyoh, to kill, after decades of imprisonment for her ideals. Not even I could do that. Will is a catalyst, as inevitable and purely natural as the season's change. If only Will could embrace his elemental nature…

… Hannibal broke eye contact first, and took in *La Primavera* once more. Then he turned and stepped back into the rest of the gallery, Will at his side. There were more visitors now, though the halls seemed hushed, library-like, similar to the stillness that encased the chapel at Palermo, the same reverential quiet broken only by prayers and striking matches. *Off season,* Will thought. Fewer tourists, a blessing.

In no hurry, they passed the paintings, considering some carefully, others deserving only a lingering glance. Hannibal paused in front of Carvaggio's *Bacchus* . "He has your coloring, Will."

Will chuckled. "Yeah?"

"You flush like that, darkest in your face and hands," Hannibal told him, the side of his mouth quirking up, bringing an opposing pleasure to the pain evident on his face as he limped. "But not because of wine."

"Not because of– oh." Will chuckled again, even though it hurt his ribs. "I, ah, I didn't know."

"Hmm." Hannibal drew closer, apparently oblivious to a pair of nuns passing by — or because of them — and kissed Will's forehead, then his lips. Each touch was brief but Will was aware of how warm his mouth was.

The last one. The last time . Will it at last be the last?

Will could feel the same melancholy questioning radiating through those kisses from Hannibal, mirroring the inquiries preceding grief that floated through his own mind. No wonder they lingered in the gallery, delaying their departure. From Florence, or from this life.

Hannibal released him and they turned to walk shoulder to shoulder. A group of schoolchildren marched by in neat rows, led by a teacher, another adult bringing up the rear.

Several of them turned their heads to stare at the two of them. Will tried a watered-down smile, but it didn't change the fact that he and Hannibal looked like they'd been in an hours-long bar fight or a car crash, the fingerprints of violence all over their faces, and evident in the way they walked. Two broken bodies, broken minds, broken hearts. He hoped the children would be deep in the gallery or having lunch in a park when he did what he had to do.

Assuming he could do it.

You have to cut that part out.

Easy enough for Jack to say. Jack's existence wasn't symbiotic.

You're fostering codependency.

Hannibal paused before another painting. It showed two women with dark hair holding down a bearded man, severing his head with a sword. The artist had captured a shockingly realistic arterial spray. It made Will think the painter had seen someone decapitated before…

… Will stares at *Judith Beheading Holofernes* . His features arrange themselves as they do when he is analyzing a crime scene, activating his extraneous neurons to see the world through the eyes of a killer. Or killers, in this case.

"Got the drop on him while he was asleep," he murmurs, stepping closer to the painting. I follow, looming over his shoulder to catch his scent. He has been in the forest. The faintest touch of ozone. There was a storm. It reminds me of Bella Crawford's perfume, "Bolt of Lightning" by JAR. "There had to be two of them. One alone wouldn't be strong enough, even with the element of surprise."

I study the back of his neck, the curve of his ear, the way his hair falls against the soft skin there. I memorize the little freckle at his nape. I will be able to draw him from memory, down to these tiny details.

"Judith was a student of deception," I say. "Used her charm and beauty to save Israel from the Assyrians. She wielded these weapons to ingratiate herself with the Assyrian general, Holofernes. One night, he slept deeply, in a drunken stupor, and she betrayed that trust."

"Pulled out a different weapon." Will glances at me sidelong, and I am equally wounded by his profile, the sword sweeping through my heart instead of my neck, but just as violently.

"And brought home his head. His army fell, and Israel was saved."

Will turns to face me. His eyes ask the question that neither of our mouths do: *did she love him? If she did, would she still have cut off his head to save her people?*

"I thought this particular piece might appeal to you," I say, my voice unaffected by the neurons firing in my hippocampus, the hormones of love and distress mixing in my blood to form a toxic brew. My heart rate ticks up. "Old Testament justice."

Will's eyes are alight as he takes in the painting's visceral details. I imagine he is thinking of Randall Tier. He confirms by saying, "I can almost… taste the blood."

"Taste and smell are the oldest senses and the closest to the center of the mind." I step closer to illustrate, letting my scent come to him, and his come to me. We would know each other anywhere. We have known each other in the dark, and in dreams, by scent alone. We gravitate toward one another like an infant turning its face towards its mother's breast, looking for the taste of her milk.

"The parts that preclude pity and morality." And just like that, Will has looped his arm through mine, hand on my bicep, as natural as anything he's ever done. I feel the press of each individual finger through my coat.

We walk the gallery with halting, heavy steps, headed for the exit. There is one more stop; we stand before *Supper at Emmaus.* The Holy Spirit hovers above, a pyramid fitted with an all-seeing eye. Jesus came to that dinner disguised as something other than himself. It was only after he'd blessed the bread that his disciples saw him for who he really was. Still, the meal began with deception. I'm curious if the next dinner we share will be the same…

…"They play in the dome of our skulls like miracles illuminated in a church ceiling. The ceremonies and sights and exchanges of dinner can be more engaging than theater," Hannibal said.

Will took a breath and let it out slowly. He felt he should be anxious, on edge, unable, perhaps, to touch Hannibal, knowing what was coming – what was *probably* coming – but he felt nothing of the sort, just the impulse to lean his cheek against Hannibal's shoulder, which he did. Hannibal turned his head and pressed his lips against the top of Will's hair.

"Speaking of dinner." Hannibal paused in front of *Angel Playing the Lute.* They drew closer to the painting to let another group of schoolchildren pass. This crew was older, all spots and floppy hair and bad posture, chattering in Italian until they were hushed by the docent. Many were so absorbed in their friends or their phones that they didn't bat an eye at Will and Hannibal's injuries, or the way they stood so close together, hands clasped between them. "I'd like to extend an invitation, Will."

"Oh?" His pulse leapt, a startled animal suddenly rearing.

"Jack Crawford is with the *polizia* now, at my flat, with Bedelia, no doubt answering a series of tedious questions. Depending on his observational instincts and Bedelia's wiles, he should be on his way to Professor Sogliato's home soon enough. I thought the three of us could have dinner."

He said it so casually, with his same damn courtesy, knowing full well what he was really asking. It made Will furious and simultaneously proud of his confidence. Like Judith and Abra, their success was guaranteed if they were loyal to one another. And loyal to the cause.

"Professor Sogliato?"

“A previous dinner guest.”

“Ah.”

It was perfection. *Hannibal* was perfection.

Will turned to the painting and picked out the tiny details of the angel’s tousled hair. This was a chance for redemption, a chance to replay what should have happened that night in Baltimore, to reclaim what they should have had.

Except Abigail wasn’t waiting with her bags packed. Abigail was dead, because Hannibal slit her throat.

But Jack Crawford could still die. Die for his demands, die for his blind, heartless justice, die for his after-the-fact apologies, die for his dogged pursuit of them. And it would be over. Will would have stood at the crossroads and chosen a path that would lead him out of Florence, hand in hand with the man he loved. Trailing blood the entire way. Bellies full of human flesh and unearned godhood…

… Will doesn’t respond immediately, but instead turns to gaze at *Angel Playing the Lute.* I study him carefully, but he gives me nothing, no discernible micro-expression, no perceivable hint of intention.

I have prepared myself for every outcome, as always. Kiss or kill.

A last-minute menu change is no worry at all, I tell myself.

Except I want him. I want him with me. I want him at my side. I want his love and all that comes with it. I want him to see me, and to love what he sees without conditions.

I place my hand against the back of his neck, my index and middle finger sliding up into his hair, which, despite his long travels, is soft and fragrant. “You said you needed to be clear about what you were seeing. Tell me, Will – when you look at me, what do you see?”

He slides his hands around my waist, under my jacket, resting them above my hips. Even these gentle touches make my skin ache where Jack drove his foot into my abdomen. I’m lucky he didn’t rupture any of my organs. But what comes out of Will’s mouth next has the ability to do much worse.

“I see you – all of you. I see myself… *through* your eyes. And I see me as you see me.” He eases me forward and I let him, angling my neck to kiss him, firm, sweet, resolute. “We’re conjoined. Same heart, same blood flowing between us.” He lifts his hand and strokes my split cheek with the back of his fingers. “You realize… if, ah, you *eat me* … it’ll be *real* cannibalism.”

“Because we’re the same,” I breathe against his lips.

“You’d be eating yourself,” he assures me before I kiss him again.

We are interrupted by the polite cough of a docent. Will's eyes are murder, but I offer her an apologetic nod. We dutifully step away from one another.

"Think we've overstayed our welcome?" Will asks under his breath.

I nod. He smiles, the same petal curve that lingers on the lips of Sanzio's *Madonna of the Goldfinch.* She gazes with pure love at a young Christ and John the Baptist, knowing, perhaps, that one day they will be sacrificed, one nailed to a cross, the other's head served on a platter, and she will be a lady of perpetual sorrow.

He lets me walk ahead again. I turn my back on him once more, a simultaneous dangling of bait and a sign of trust.

As we round a corner, we are separated by yet another line of schoolchildren with matching uniforms, smelling of sandwich bread and milk and the cheap floral soap their mothers use to scrub behind their ears before tucking them into bed. A pair of young teachers bring up the rear, whispering to one another. I catch the gist; one of them thinks Will is handsome, and the other warns her against men who get in the kind of trouble that bloodies their faces and blackens their eyes.

Good advice…

… As the last of the children passed, their teachers close behind, Will realized he'd lost sight of Hannibal. Klaxons went off in his mind.

"Shit," he hissed under his breath, stomach suddenly roiling against itself. To have come all this way, just to lose him now…?

Just as he passed the hallway to the gallery's washrooms, he was startled by the sudden opening of a door. The lighting here was dim, but he recognized Hannibal in a brief flash, and knew his smell immediately. Hannibal took him around the waist, pulled him into a small closet stocked with cleaning supplies and shut the door. It was pitch black. Hannibal pressed into him from behind, lips at his neck. Will couldn't help but make a small sound of ecstasy.

"I apologize for my impatience," Hannibal murmured into his ear, voice low and gravelly. "This would make a lovely dessert, but I've been impulsive as of late."

Will laughed softly. "When have you ever… denied yourself anything?"

"Rarely. But I know how to delay pleasure for a greater reward." Hannibal encircled him entirely from behind, trapping Will's arms at his sides, hands spread over his chest and midsection. Will could feel the change in Hannibal's outline, pressing insistently into his backside. A feeling washed over him, a mix of triumph and desire that made his skin hot and desperate to be touched. The complete blackness of the little cupboard enhanced every sense.

Hannibal kissed the back of his ear, then buried his face in Will's neck again, moving his lips down to the edge of his jacket's neckline. He reached up to tug at the fabric impatiently for a

few moments before sighing, a low, frustrated sound. Will had a brief feeling of vertigo as Hannibal whipped him around, still holding onto his collar, and pulled their mouths together feverishly. Will felt through the dark for Hannibal's face, running his hand down it, cupping his jaw with one hand and the supple rise of his back curve in the other. The gentle noise of the gallery was a dull drone in the background, the little closet filled with darkness and the sound of their breathing, the sensual noises of their passion.

Hannibal pushed him back against the shelves of bottles and bags, which by themselves were soft enough, though the shelving pressed uncomfortably into the already aching flesh of his back and his spine. No matter. Will found himself desperately fumbling at the buttons of Hannibal's shirt one handed, in the dark. He gave up and went for the belt buckle instead.

Hannibal disengaged and stepped back, breathing hard, running his fingers down Will's arms to find his hands, which he took in his own. "Here?" he said between breaths.

"Yes," Will insisted hotly, trying to pull his hands free. Hannibal grappled his wrists instead, holding him hard enough that he couldn't get free without a struggle. His pulse pounded through his head and down between his legs. "Anywhere— as long as—"

Hannibal kissed him again, but kept a hold on his wrists, bringing them up between their chests. "Will it help you make up your mind about dinner?"

" *Fuck* ," Will managed through his quickened breaths as Hannibal stepped back again, still holding his wrists.

"Things often become clearer," Hannibal assured him, "in the moments after."

"What are you waiting for?" Will demanded, voice rising. Hannibal hushed him by burying their mouths together…

… Kissing Will in complete darkness is precious to me. Without my eyes, my other senses awaken. I am keenly aware of his taste, rare and sweet, and the feel of his body through his clothing. I hear his breath catch, and I feel it as well. I can identify what the air passing through his lungs means simply by sound. He is amorous but in pain as I handle his likely-cracked ribs and other tender spots on his shoulders and torso.

My ability to discern scent awakens further, and I edge my mouth away from his, tasting the sweet-salt of his skin, the alluring texture of his stubbled cheek and throat. His hands climb over my back before closing on my own injured rib cage and curling around the nape of my sore neck in a possessive grip. I put my nose to his throat and inhale, as deeply as I can, despite the wild pain that erupts in my chest cavity as a result. The woods, the lightning – he encountered a dog somewhere, of course he did – the wet earth, cold mornings, train stations, and beneath it all, unadorned by any kind of perfume, is Will, his living body, sweat, breath, pheromone, the most delicious combination I've ever had the pleasure of bringing into my lungs.

I wish there was a way to bottle it. I doubt it will last long after he's dead. I consider secretly keeping his clothes, sealing them up so that I can revisit his scent when he's gone. No. Best to cut free entirely. He will live inside me, in the memory palace; that is enough. It has to be.

I allow hope to flutter in my breast like Peter Bernadone's bird, a miraculous resurrection. Perhaps. Perhaps he will join me for dinner, and we will eat, and then we will flee this place and disappear into our new lives together.

I allow hope, but I also have my hand around its neck, ready to wring.

I pull away just long enough to drop my jacket to the floor. When I put my hands on him again, I can feel him unbuttoning his shirt from the bottom up. I unclasp my belt and zipper and free myself quickly before doing the same to him. We are both poised and ready and I wrap my hand around us, joining us as if we were one. Will backs up a half-step, probably to rest his backside against the shelf behind us, which lowers his pelvis to the perfect angle. He takes my face in his hand and kisses me, hungry but ultimately gentle, resting his other on my shoulder, gathering the fabric of my shirt and twisting it in his relentless grip. I lay my free hand against the shelf behind us for leverage and begin to move, gliding us together as best I can.

It is a blissful darkness we share, saturated with our panting breaths and the scent of our bodies mingling as our anatomy joins.

It can be like this, Will. Always, I want to say. And then I say it to myself.

But that future hinges on Will's decision. I know there is a knife in his pocket; I felt it as I groped him in the dark. Perhaps he plans to open Jack's throat with it. And perhaps mine. He won't know until he knows.

And then we will see if either of us will survive the separation.

Will is trying to stay quiet, though I think it would be amusing to have a security guard or a docent or the poor cleaning woman open the door behind us right now. Amusing, but rude, I suppose. Besides, I enjoy it when he tries to stifle himself, because he often can't when I am pleasuring him. He kisses me to absorb the sounds and moans into my mouth. I accept his sound and I eat it, an apéritif for the meal to come.

I grind into him, slowly at first, then with more insistence, our sensitive undersides clasped together and reveling in the mirrored touch. My mind peels back the years to the first time I did this to him, in my bed, at the house in Baltimore. Despite telling me he didn't want to see me again, that he didn't find me that interesting. It was the first time I saw that lovely color come to his cheeks as he climaxed, the way his mouth fell open, unconscious to my gaze and uninhibited. And then, after, he'd told me about when his mother had killed a man with a car and sworn him to secrecy. I was the first person he'd ever told and that felt more beautiful and raw and tender than our sex act had.

I had been used to confessions in therapy. I have known many others' secrets. But Will's secret was like opening a tomb and finding a fabled gem. An artifact I didn't know I was looking for.

Now, he says my name, and buries his face in my shoulder, still twisting the fabric of my shirt, and releases his climax against me to muffle it. I cradle it in my mind, imagine it against my heart and sinking beneath my skin. His emission is warm and slicks my hand and within seconds, I am pouring my pleasure into his neck, trembling against him…

… Hannibal released them slowly. Will still couldn't see anything, but somehow, Hannibal had found a cloth and was running it gently between them to catch what he could. Will was still breathing hard, leaning against the back shelf, when he heard Hannibal zipping up. Wincing, he did the same. Hannibal's hands on him now, fingertips sliding through the dark to find the buttons of his shirt, refastening them. Will tucked in his shirt tails and heard the rustle of fabric that was probably Hannibal putting his jacket back on with a soft groan. The rush of endorphins post-orgasm had helped Will's sore body, but tensing to come had also inflamed the muscles, negating any benefit there.

He was tired. Of all of it. Of the pain, of the indecision. He just wanted to sleep.

He could sleep after he'd killed Hannibal, after the authorities had finished their questions, on his folded arms in the interrogation room or the hard bed of a cell.

He could probably catch a nap after dinner, before they left, or sleep on the train as he fled Italy, resting his head on Hannibal's shoulder.

He could sleep when he was dead.

Will felt Hannibal's arms collect him in a supple embrace. "Are you hungry, Will?"

"Starving," Will said against Hannibal's neck. "What's for dinner?"

"Never ask what's for dinner. Spoils the surprise."

Their kiss felt simultaneously infinite and limited.

At last, Hannibal broke free and Will let him go so he could open the closet door. They slipped out, unnoticed, and headed for the exit.

Hannibal and Will stood shoulder to shoulder and stepped out into the piazza, into the sun.

… and CUT!

Sigh… you know what happens next. Will pulls the knife. Chiyoh shoots him through the shoulder. Hannibal takes him to Sogliato's home and prepares to serve dinner… Will's brains fried in butter. But, the dirty cops of Florence bust in just in time. They snatch Will and Hannibal for Mason Verger.

… stay tuned!

Season 3 Episode 7: Digestivo

Chapter Summary

Hannibal saved Will from Muskrat Farm. This chapter fills in the gaps between Hannibal's spree killing and Will waking up with Hannibal at his bedside.

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “New Gods” – Grimes

“Oh, you're all I know
But what can I do if I can't see you?
It's too bright
Broken glass that shines like northern lights
So I pray, but the world burns
And still, you need to come first
So I don't know where you stand
Are you a man?
Are you something I can't stand?
Hands reaching out for new gods
You can't give me what I want
But what do I know? Oh
What do I know?
I wanna let go, I
I wanna, wanna, wanna let go
I wear black eyeliner, black attire, yeah
So take me higher and higher and higher
But the world is a sad place, baby
Only brand new gods can save me
Only brand new gods can save me
Oh, oh, oh
Only brand new gods
Hands reaching out for new gods
You can't give me what I want
Hands reaching out for new gods
You can't give me what I want”

Another wonderful canon Hannigram moment is when we see Hannibal carry Will out of Muskrat Farm, having slaughtered many of Mason Verger’s men and allowing Alana and Margot to finally have what they want – a vial of sperm and a dead Mason. Chiyoh, ever vigilant, shoots Hannibal’s pursuers. This scene happens a few minutes after those final deaths.

If it weren't for the snowy roads, I would be very tempted to take Mason's Lamborghini Gallardo. I've often entertained the thought of flying through the winding highways of southern France in such a machine, with Will beside me in the passenger's seat. It's unfortunate that the car is not suited for the weather or my precious cargo. Instead I select the key for a nondescript utility vehicle from the rack in the over-sized garage.

As gently as I can, I secure Will's limp body into the front seat, supporting him as I recline it as far as it will go before fastening his seat belt. His eyes flutter as I tuck his arms against his chest and shut the door. Behind the wheel, I start the engine and turn on the heat, directing the vents towards Will.

We leave Muskrat Farm behind us, traversing dark roads until we come to the nearby highway. After this, it is the interstate, then the exit for Wolf Trap. When I pull onto the uneven surface of a rural back road, Will's eyes open. He looks first at the ceiling of the car, then over at me. He tries to speak, but the paralytic administered by Dr. Cordell Doemling is still in effect. Will is conscious, aware of every bodily sensation, but unable to move.

On a dark, featureless farm, I hide the vehicle behind an abandoned shed and open Will's door. "We'll have to walk the rest of the way," I explain with a rueful smile. He looks at me and his mouth twitches; perhaps he is trying to return the expression. I hoist him into my arms again. My battered body should be sending me constant stings of its trauma, warnings to cease my strain. I feel nothing but the post-kill euphoria.

They'll call it a massacre. I've never murdered so many people in such a short period of time. I can now add the spree killer feather to my cap, and I find I wear it proudly. My adrenaline and endorphins make it easy to carry Will the last miles to his little house, a dark ship on a dark sea. It is like he weighs nothing. I relish the feeling of his living breath when I shift him closer to my neck, rotating the pressure-bearing section of muscles in my arms. He lays very still, dead weight, though he blinks periodically during the journey.

I retrieve the key he keeps beneath the loose piece of siding and gain entry. Will's eyes open as if anticipating the dogs, then close again. Of course they aren't here. He's been in Europe looking for me. The house is closed up, cold, the air stale and dusty. I place Will on his made bed, then stand to stretch and take off the stolen shoes, too small for me.

Will rests easily enough, his eyes closed again. I turn on a soft lamp in the corner for him and tell him I will return in a moment. If he hears me he makes no indication.

I lock the door and strip carefully before stepping into the shower, rinsing the foreign blood from my body and cleaning my wounds. I slip into Will's plaid bathrobe, careful not to stretch through the shoulders and weaken the seams, as it is too small for me. He hasn't worn it in weeks, yet it smells like him. And the ship on the bottle, but it only makes me smile.

On the kitchen table is the box of mementos from Will's family – the silver baby spoon and the photographs, the war medals and the madwoman's painting. It sits there as an offering for

whoever comes to claim his belongings – his father, or his aunt, perhaps. The check to the animal rescue is still clipped to the refrigerator.

He had not planned to return from Europe, one way or the other. All the better. His affairs have been arranged, and we can leave tomorrow.

I put my clothes in his washing machine and start the cycle, then return to Will's side. He doesn't respond when I say his name. I search through his cupboards for a large bowl and fill it with warm water. I bring it to his bedside with his first aid kit and a bar of his cheap blue soap.

"Will," I say softly.

Still no response. I take his pulse. It is slow but steady.

I undress him, doing my best not to jostle his bruised body. The incision Dr. Doemling began is about two inches long. My hasty stitches are better than I thought. The scar will be minimal if he takes care of it. Not like the gash where I sawed through his forehead, intent on eating his brain. I'd meant to sauté pieces of it in clarified butter, feeding some to Will even as his vivisection slowly killed him. That scar was made by a serrated edge and will leave a mark to match the one on his belly, his brands of betrayal.

Mason had me branded as well. I'd forgotten in all the excitement.

The rapture of my murder spree braids suddenly with physical desire as I begin to cleanse Will, washing away Muskrat Farm as best I can. As I clean the dashed line Cordell marked around his face, the path the scalpel was meant to travel, one of Will's legs gives a violent twitch, and his eyes fly open as he gasps in a breath.

"Easy, Will," I soothe him, dotting the warm cloth across his forehead, letting a bit of water dampen his hair so I can run my fingers through it, teasing out the tangles. "You're safe."

I mean that entirely. While eating Will's brain, and feeding intermittent morsels of it to Will himself while Jack watched would have been a robust spectacle, and quite fitting, my promise to myself has been usurped by my promise to Alana, a promise I traded for both of our lives. I promised Alana I would kill her, and I will. I promised Alana I would save Will, and I have. And that, to me, is tantamount to a pledge; I will never try to kill him again, no matter what he may do to me. It feels holy, this cheek-turning. A sacred vow.

"I imagine Dr. Doemling — Cordell — explained the paralytic agent he gave you?"

Will jerks his chin, a nod of the affirmative, I believe.

"It will take some time to wear off." I allow myself a moment to take in the sight of nude Will in his entirety, mapping his bruises and gashes. His expression is difficult to read; I assume because he hasn't regained control of his face. He may not be fully able to emote, but his cheeks are deepening in color. I continue my patient cleansing, eventually rolling him on his stomach and positioning his arms so his head rests against them and to the side.

All of the zest that flowered in me as I dashed in skull after skull of Mason Verger's Sardinian thugs with a hammer coalesces between my legs as I wash Will with gentle strokes. I cannot prevent the lingering attention I pay to his backside, longing to breach his crevice with my fingers and tongue.

When I return Will to his back to check his stitches again, he is half-hard and perspiring. "H-Hannibal…" he manages through the side of his mouth, one corner drooping like a veteran pugilist's.

I smile and sink into the bed, taking one of his ankles in my hand. I bend his knee a few times, then massage his calf. "The paralytic you were given was designed to block neuromuscular transmission. As it wears off, you may have some uncontrolled muscle movements." As I say it, Will's leg jerks in my hand. I hold it steady and massage his calf up to the crook of his knee. Easing his leg down into my lap, I pick up the other and repeat my treatment. For someone who has been pumped full of neuromuscular blockers he is surprisingly erect. I wonder if this is some kind of pharmacological side effect or a result of my treatment. The thrill of our escape? A brush with death never fails to inspire me and Will knows this.

"You must have landed here when Chiyoh threw you from the train." One of his knees is more swollen than the other, and a long swath of bruising arches up from it along the side of his thigh. I treat this area cautiously even as I work my hands higher, trying to stimulate the muscles back to life.

As my hands travel closer to his groin, and I can feel his anticipation, I abandon him. I hate to admit it, but like Mason Verger, I enjoy denying things from time to time, though with Will, the denial is always, *always* temporary. I have consistently had trouble refusing him anything he asks, especially when he says *please* . Getting up from the bed, I retrieve a cup of water from the kitchen. He eyes it gratefully, able to move his mouth with more ease, the smile not quite so lopsided. I pull a second pillow behind his head, then lift and resettle him. Propped up, he can drink, which is another way we can flush the paralytic from his system.

"T-thanks," he manages through unresponsive lips, voice still slurred. "How… did… you…"

"Alana Bloom freed me," I say, noting that now he can raise his brows in surprise. "Margot came for a visit. Mason promised her a baby again. I was able to help her see that he would always deny her. Now was her chance."

"Did.. yuh-you…?"

"Wouldn't have been therapeutic for poor Margot if I'd killed Mason." I settle next to him on the bed and guide the cup to his lips again. A single drop spills from the corner of his mouth and I trace my finger along the moisture, bringing it back to his lips. He closes his mouth briefly around the pad of my finger, and I can feel my insistent pulse against the tiny press of tongue. "I'll be blamed for it. Credit I don't mind taking. The world is a brighter place without him, wouldn't you agree?"

Will nods. He looks away from me and his eyes are momentarily distant.

“Not to worry. The Verger billions won’t go to the church – the insufferable Baptists you were forced to endure during childhood. Within the month, Margot and Alana will be expecting.”

“M-M-Mason’s baby?” Will slurs, his arm twitching as he regains some mobility. “Gonna turn out… ugh…” He arches his neck against the pillow, squeezing his eyes shut as he tries to move his body. “F-fucked up,” he finishes. “Bad genetics.”

“Let’s hope he takes after Alana.”

Will sighs.”You thought of… everything.” He coughs. I help him sit up higher, and note how he inhales my scent when I’m close, my essence no doubt mingling with his own coming from his body and the robe I’m wearing. “Did you think about w-what you’re gonna… do with me?”

“Hmm.” I brush his damp hair back from his forehead with a careful touch, precise with my movement as not to disturb his numerous head injuries. “A condition of my release was a promise to Alana Bloom. Ever your champion, Will. She asked me to save you. It wouldn’t do for me to eat you immediately following our escape.”

“Sounds like ‘kill’ is off the table.” Will strains to lift his arm, and manages to get his hand on my thigh. His touch burns through the rough terry cloth of his cheap robe and I can feel the press of every finger.

“It appears that way.” I pick up his limp arm and clasp his hand. Massaging the extensor and flexor carpi ulnaris, I bend his elbow a few times. He grunts, a pained grimace crossing his features. I extend his elbow again and watch his response, slowly folding it back. The joint pops audibly and the swelling is evident. “Sprained,” I tell him, leaning over to sift through the medical supplies for an elastic bandage that has seen better days. I wrap his arm dutifully, applying the requisite compression.

Something about my ministries has aroused Will further. It amuses me that he can do absolutely nothing about it, cannot touch himself or me. He makes no sign that he is aware of his condition or is aware that I am aware. If anything he looks calm, resolute.

I help him lean forward again to drink, then angle myself behind him, spreading him between my legs, leaning back on my chest where I cradle him, precious thing he is. “Can you move your toes?” I ask, my question deliberately casual and unaffected as I stroke his neck with one hand, working the fingers of my other against his chest in an effort to massage out the paralytic. Ineffective for that aim, but effective in other ways. I press his shoulders gently, then with more force while still being mindful of his injuries. He has soft tissue damage all through his trapezius and levator scapulae that is inflamed and likely very sore, the muscles locked up and immobile. Hanging upside down in the hog transport with his hands zip-tied behind his back could not have helped the situation.

“There.” Will has managed to flex the toes on his left foot.

“Well done.” I push gently against his deltoids, massaging as I go. The creature that tore into the Sardinians is still very close to the surface of my skin, and keeping him in check is a

delicate but beautiful torment, a thing made of spun glass. I want to ravage Will. Instead, I concentrate on cataloging his wounds. He needs Dr. Lecter now, not the part of me that is too primordial and vicious to have a name. I draw the cloth from the bowl next to his bedside and wring it out one-handed. There is some blood behind his ear I missed. After I clean it, I replace the cloth in the bowl and bend my neck, resting my cheek against the side of his head, my hand spread over his heart.

Despite his condition, I want to show him. I want him to understand that it was the part of me Pazzi called "Il Mostro" that saved us. All I ever wanted was for him to see me. Over time, I wanted him to love me *because* of it, not in spite of it. Will is the only person who is capable of such an impossible thing.

And to think, I almost ate his brain. To be fair, he didn't leave me many options.

He spoke well when he said that "kill" was off the table. That leaves the other side of the coin.

I rearrange Will's body in my arms, the hand over his heart sliding lower. I rest it just below his navel and do not go further. He huffs a small sigh, his first indication of frustration. I laugh quietly into his hair, then tip his head back and angle his chin with my fingertips to kiss him, the press of my lips maddeningly soft. Still, I do not touch him. If he could move, all he would have to do is slide back against me further to bring my hand to his persistent erection, but he can't. I move my hand a half inch and he growls into my mouth through our kiss. This earns him my tongue in his mouth, a rough and sudden penetration that he accepts with a hum of yearning. I move my hand a little further, my fingertips touching the base now, curling in the swath of dark hair. He breaks away from my kiss, able to move his neck now, apparently. I settle for tasting his throat, though I should make him pay for his impatience.

His arm twitches as he regains a bit more control, but he can't lift it more than a few inches from the mattress. I have mercy on him and wrap my hand around his length and caress him, drawing my fingertips up under the head, thumbing the slit, delighting in the appearance of the pearlescent bead that forms as a response to my treatment. Will exhales a moan and tips his head back into my neck and shoulder, his hair whispering against my skin. I let go and he arches his back instinctively, trying to find my touch again.

I turn him on his side, arms around his to keep them from falling away from his torso and jostling the sprained elbow. Sliding free, I reposition him on his back and lean over him on my hands and knees. He tries to raise his arms again but doesn't get far. I can see his abdominal muscles contracting now.

This is very interesting. Bondage without the bonds.

"What the hell are you smiling about?" he mutters, trying to lift his head. It tilts back and his chin juts out, but his muscles won't follow his commands, not yet. He curses at me as I get up from the bed, making as though I might go put the laundry in the dryer. But again, my mercy overrides my desire to play with him, and I root through his bedside drawer for the lubricant I hope is still there. It is. I wonder if he has used it since I've been away. On himself, maybe, in the dark, thinking about me.

I work some into my palm and use friction to warm it before I grasp him. He sighs in deep relief at my lubricated touch. As I tease him, I lower my lips to the side of his neck again. What's one more bruise? I use my tongue to track the muscle and bone, finding his clavicle and following it to the center divot. I drop my mouth a little to the left and moisten the skin, then close my lips on it, bringing the blood to the surface.

His leg twitches and turns to the side, the knee bending a few degrees.

Now I do not move my hand. I cup all of him appreciatively, hefting all of it in my slicked hand, fingers playing in his hair, then working their way back. I press my index and middle finger pads against his prostate from the outside and massage through the barrier of the perineum. He curses again, using the absorbed filth of his upbringing, repeating words he likely heard as a small child in the boat yards or from his father's loud, drunken friends. I have no explanation as to why his vulgarity tantalizes me, but it always does.

I'll be a real fucking gentleman.

In the same breath he praises me. I untie the robe in response and press myself into him along the slicked surface he's created, touching him only with my matching anatomy, a slow, aching grind that leaves us both gasping. Repetition nearly finishes him; I pull back from his unexpected tremble.

"Don't," he warns. "N-not yet."

"You're in no position," I remind him, but sit back on my heels. Moistening my fingers again, I lean over him on one hand and my knees, and I watch him sweat as I penetrate him, squeezing his eyes shut and tipping his head back. He can lift his arms now, but they flop uselessly against me, the fingers slow and unresponsive. I stroke his prostate but with no sense of rhythm. He stubbornly refuses to beg me for his release. I resolve to wait him out. I can wait for Will's changes of heart; I am sure of this now.

Despite my efforts to delay, he edges closer. I nearly lose my control of him but slip my fingers out just in time. Ah, the vulgarities that flow from that petal mouth like roses from Chloris's lips as she exhales springtime flowers. All-consuming joy.

Tonight, Will leans more toward the iron in the space between iron and silver. He refuses to beg for mercy. I resolve to show him none, until I find myself at the end of my reserves. With self-control depleted, I lift myself to his entrance and press past the first ring of muscle.

All at once, I am on my back, Will's cheap sheets chafing my battered skin. Will is holding me down, a cruel half-smile teasing the corner of his mouth, dripping his sweat onto my neck and chest.

It seems the paralytic has worn off entirely. Who knows how long ago. I was none the wiser.

Clever, clever boy. My clever boy.

"Stay down," he warns, "if you know what's good for you."

I love him most when he delights in his wickedness, whether it be here, like this, or gloating over a righteous kill, smeared with blood.

How can I refuse? His beauty at this angle, as he looms over me, a threatening vessel of vengeance, is paralyzing in its own right. I relax my resistance. Slowly, like training an animal, he removes his hand from one of my wrists and leans back to gather me in his hand. I watch, transfixed, as he positions the head and slides down onto me, one inch at a time, panting, eyes shut and his mouth sweetly open, wet and inviting, his hair falling forward over his gashed forehead and getting in his eyes. He makes no move to sweep it away so I do it for him with my free hand.

I let him use me for his pleasure. He rolls his hips and finds the mark, still holding my wrist down with one hand. Will takes my other palm and folds it around his length in the front, his hand over mine, and objectifies me again as a tool for his enjoyment.

It doesn't take much. His raw voice echoes through the lonely rooms of his little house, followed not long after by another, louder sound as he orgasms again from a different source.

It must have taken significant willpower to force his limbs out of the paralytic, and as soon as the tremors have eased themselves away he collapses on me. I chuckle softly and kiss him, shifting his limp body under me, gathering his legs in the crooks of my elbows. I am gentle with him now. He looks up at me with an expression that is equal parts tender and sad. Even as we make love I don't understand it. This is the beginning of the rest of his life, our lives together. There is nothing here but the joy of understanding, and a stretch of years ahead of us where every night, we will feast on each other, or someone else. Bedelia, Alana, or Jack at long last?

Change can be painful, I remind myself. The caterpillar liquefies. It is perfectly reasonable for Will to mourn his past life, his past self. He will be free of that grief soon enough.

It is a pity we won't be able to return to Florence. But there are many other places I would like to show him, their magic sprung to life by seeing them again through Will's eyes, through his wonder. I think Prague might be the place to start.

I finish, and it feels like the first time again, after Tobias Budge had tried to kill each of us on the same day. I had the zest of my kill, and a brush with mortality, and I had Will, who opened his legs and gave me his virginity just because I asked.

In the ensuing moments, I cradle him beneath me, still inside, lingering in the embrace. I lift my head and give him exhausted, gratified kisses that he receives gratefully enough. Yet I sense a hesitation. A cooling of his mind and body, even as we cling to one another in the shadows of his little house, our last night in this bed, in this country, most likely.

For a long stretch of silent time, he lays tucked under my arm, his favorite place, ear over my heart. Then he shifts away. I sit up and wring out the cloth in the bowl and use it to clean myself. I wring it out again and swipe it over the scar on his abdomen, a gentle stroke. He takes it and attends to himself instead.

We rest again, beneath the blankets now. He faces away from me, and I curl up behind him, an arm cocked for him to lay on, the other holding him firmly in place around his abdomen, pressing him back against me. The furnace in the little house is set very low, since no one is supposed to be here – just enough to keep the pipes from freezing. I am warmed entirely by Will's body and my thoughts of the future, but he shivers intermittently, even with me, even beneath the blankets. Eventually I find him something to wear; a flannel shirt and pants, thick socks, though I am loath to break our skin connection. I wonder if he has a fever – an infection setting in? His forehead seems cool, dampened with the faint sheen of sweat worked up during our lovemaking.

He does not sleep, so I hold him close, from behind, and tell him about my adventures at Muskrat Farm, how I surprised each of Mason's men in turn, the largest group being four gathered around a card table. How one had unloaded his gun at me and missed every single shot, which was clearly an act of God and His sense of humor. When I've added it up, I killed thirteen people tonight, an auspicious number. Chiyoh had her two, and Margot and Alana the one for a grand total of sixteen. A massacre indeed.

"And, uh, Mason's doctor?" Will prompts after I've lapsed into satisfied silence.

"Dr. Cordell Doemling." I sigh against Will's hair with a smile. "I caught him cutting into your face – were you conscious?"

"In and out," Will says. "I remember him screaming."

"Oh, yes, he screamed," I confirm. "Once I'd secured him, I thought about biting the other side of his face, a mirror image of the wound you created. Except I would have swallowed, which is what you should have done, Will – it would have disfigured him significantly. First time I've ever had to scold you about swallowing."

Will breathes out a thin laugh.

"Regrettably, I was short on time. So, I took a bone saw and removed everything below the knees and elbows, using tourniquets to keep him alive. He gave you no anesthesia so I gave him none. I began with the hand that sliced your face, of course." I nuzzle the back of his neck and slide my hand along his arm to clasp over his, entwining our grip. "He choked to death on his own fingers."

"How did – tell me about Mason," Will requests softly.

"I didn't see it happen," I say, voice tinged with regret. "But I can tell you how he woke up from his anesthesia."

Will nods. I feel the brush of his curls against my cheek and lip.

"I removed Cordell's face and placed it on his. I imagine he regained consciousness thinking the surgery had gone as planned. I left a mirror next to his hand." I smile. "It pleases me to think of him looking into it and seeing features he didn't expect. What the ladies did after that, I don't know. I hope they anticipated the gun he keeps in the side pocket of his wheelchair."

Will turns in my arms so that we face one another. The way he looks at me cools the pleasant warmth of my recollections. “Perfect,” he says softly. “Crunched for time and you, ah… thought of everything.”

“Are you pleased, Will?” I dislike the undertone of wheedling in my voice, but I can’t exclude it entirely as I form the words, brushing his hair behind his ear.

“Did it feel righteous?” Will wants to know.

“I don’t believe I would have succeeded if I wasn’t fighting my way to you,” I tell him. Of course I could have escaped, but the fire that fueled my spree killing had Will’s safety as a source.

“But did you feel like you were… administering justice?”

“I’m sure you’d agree that the world is better off without each and every one of them,” I say, sitting up on my elbow. I don’t understand what Will is driving at.

Will rolls onto his back, hands clasped over his scar, hidden beneath the green flannel. “Cordell and Mason had an, uhm, *special* relationship, wouldn’t you say?”

“I suppose.”

“It’s rare,” Will says, looking at me with a fixed, deliberate stare, “to find someone willing to kill and cook another human being, just because you asked them to. Don’t you think?”

I do not speak. I’m confused, so I choose to say nothing until I’ve heard more. My blood pressure rises even as I breathe to keep it steady.

Will’s eyes travel to the ceiling now, watching, perhaps, the shadows play in the moonlight. “They were made for each other.”

“Perhaps.” I furrow my brow, waiting to see what he will say next.

“When I saw the two of them together, interacting, taking such… pleasure in plotting torture and death… with clear… friendship – a bond between them – I couldn’t help but think…” He turns to me, his pale eyes ringed with sorrow and shadow. “I was looking at *us* , Hannibal. You and I – are just the same.”

“No,” I say immediately, a reflex.

He scoffs bitterly. “Explain to me where you draw the line. Tell me h-how we’re any different than them. Why, because you have good *taste* ?”

I protest. I tell him how Dr. Cordell Doemling left his position at a hospital in Boston, never to work in public healthcare again, amidst a child sex abuse scandal. I remind Will that Mason killed his baby and sterilized Margot after abusing her most of her life. Mason, the ugliest hypocrite of all, invoking his Risen Jesus while simultaneously practicing some of the most savage sadism the world has ever known.

Will listens to all of this, and there are tears in his eyes that he lets fall. I close my mouth and wipe them with my knuckles. “Will,” I argue, my voice soft but desperate. “We’re not like them.”

“You can argue the finer points of our cruelties against theirs,” Will whispers. “Some of the details are different, but…”

“Will,” I plead.

“It’s good they’re both dead,” Will says. “I doubt one could live without the other, now that they’d found each other. It’s a mercy.”

I kiss him now. I don’t want these words, and I don’t want to play the trump card in my hand, the final point of my argument. It’s too brutal and beautiful for this moment. Mason and Cordell never had the ability to love another, which makes them inferior beings. Of this I am certain. And perhaps Will would be correct in his comparisons if they were made three years ago and I had never met him.

I am not Mason Verger or Cordell Doemling *because of Will* .

And yet, I can’t bring myself to tell him this.

“It’s been a very long 72 hours,” I say instead. Will’s words have stripped away whatever was protecting me from feeling the pain in my body, and I am suddenly made aware of the dull ache that encompasses my entire being, the flares of pulled muscles and cracked ribs, the tight pull and biting anguish of the brand on my back, blistered and raw. “Sleep, Will.”

He turns away from me again, and it is like Chiyoh had missed her shot outside the Uffizi Gallery and he’d buried his forgiveness to the hilt in my heart. Will permits me to hold him, and eventually, he relaxes, which allows me to rest as well.

Things will look different in the morning light.

Even as Will drifts off, I am unable to. Eventually, I leave him in bed and tend to the washing. I find a blank notebook in a desk drawer and continue some work I’ve been doing. Time travel and remote viewing, shared dreams – mathematical concepts. When the clothes are finished, I dress again, pull up a chair, and wait for dawn. My love sleeps deep and dreamless.

… and CUT!

Hannibal has his conversation with Chiyoh on Will’s porch. She agrees to watch over him, and says that some beasts don’t belong in a cage. Hannibal goes inside to resume his place at Will’s side, working on his equations. Will wakes up and… BREAKS UP WITH HIM!

“I miss my dogs. But I’m not going to miss you. I’m not going to find you. I’m not going to look for you. I don’t want to know where you are or what you do. I don’t want to think about you anymore.”

“You delight in wickedness and then you berate yourself for the delight.”

“You delight. I tolerate. I don’t have your appetite. Goodbye Hannibal.”

Well, never say that Hannibal isn’t a bit dramatic after a break up… he waits around until that evening when Jack and the FBI finally show up, probably to ask Will what the hell happened at Muskrat Farm. Hannibal gives himself up, saying, “I want you to know exactly where I am and where you can always find me.”

… stay tuned!

Season 3 Episode 8: The Great Red Dragon

Chapter Summary

Will reads and burns Hannibal's letter after Jack comes calling about the Tooth Fairy. He figures the damage is done and reads the dozens of other letters Hannibal sent over the last three years. This tears down all the mental walls and defenses he'd erected against Hannibal's influence on his mind. They meet at the gates of the memory palace.

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “Sleepwalker” – Illenium feat Joni Fatora

Sleepwalker, where do you go?
In the night
I find you in my dreams
I find you in my dreams
Sleepwalker, visions always
Just repeat
You're always in my dreams
You're always in my dreams
Did you come to make it right?
Did you come to say goodbye?
Did you come to make it right?
Did you come to say goodbye?
Did you come to say goodbye?
Did you come to say goodbye?
Sleepwalker, sleepwalker
Where did you go?
Now I'm sleepwalking again
Now I'm sleepwalking again
Now I'm sleepwalking again
Now I'm sleepwalking again
Sleepwalker, sleepwalker
Sleepwalker, sleepwalker
Sleepwalker, sleepwalker
Sleepwalker, sleepwalker
Now I'm sleepwalking again
Now I'm sleepwalking again
Sleepwalker, sleepwalker
Sleepwalker
Where did you go?

This scene occurs after Jack visits Will, and has dinner with his new family. Molly asks Jack if he's going to take Will no matter what Will decides, and Jack says yes. He needs his sweaty little empath back. That night, Molly encourages Will to go help catch the Tooth Fairy, since he won't be able to rest knowing he could stop the horrific killing of families… families like his own. Will can't sleep that night, and gets up to read a letter from Hannibal that he's been hiding in his dresser drawer. The letter warns him not to go through the door Jack's holding open, because it leads to darkness and madness. However, Hannibal also includes a newspaper clipping about the latest Tooth Fairy murders. Will burns the letter and the clipping.

As flames consumed the letter Hannibal had sent him from the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Will felt a similar fire devouring him, flames crawling over his skin and searing his eyes and lungs. Suddenly restless, he got up from the couch in front of the fireplace and went into the hallway outside the room he shared with Molly. There was a frayed rope hanging from the ceiling. He snagged it and lowered the collapsible attic stairs. Will kept the hinges oiled so they didn't make a sound. He ascended silently, switching on the bare overhead bulb with the pull string. Slipping carefully past the rubber tubs of Christmas ornaments, he knelt and worked his fingers into a gap between the rough wooden baseboard and the wall. The baseboard popped out into his hand, revealing a dark recess. From within, Will withdrew a small shoe box, child's size 13, that had once held Walter's Little League baseball cleats.

Will replaced the baseboard and descended the narrow stairs one at a time, feeling in the dark with his bare toes for the next step, then folded up the attic steps behind himself. He held the box out in front of him like an object both morbid and sacred – a saint's bone perhaps, or an entire severed hand preserved, a holy relic. He settled on the floor next to the hearth, his back against the sofa, and opened the box.

Inside, unopened, were dozens of letters, all of them addressed to him. All of them were written on thick, expensive stationery, dark blue-black calligraphy on eggshell-white paper with matching envelopes. They were unsealed, but he had never opened them.

They were from Hannibal.

Some had come to his house in Wolf Trap before he'd moved here, to Molly's acerage. They arrived reliably every month or so, and always on his birthday and Christmas. Three years, and he'd never opened a single one. Until today. The one that'd shown up in his mailbox the day Jack had come calling. It had to be a coincidence, but it certainly didn't feel like one; the common denominator was the Tooth Fairy.

Will didn't know why he'd saved Hannibal's notes. He should have burned them, unread, as soon as they arrived. He should have burned the one he'd read today without opening it.

He picked up the box and looked at the fire spitting in the hearth, bathing him in warmth and light. Without warning, a memory surfaced, breaking through the careful mental defenses

he'd built and meticulously maintained ever since the day he'd told Hannibal he never wanted to see him again. Just a flash, an image – Hannibal making a fire in the bedroom at the house in Baltimore. Nude and primal, like they shared a prehistoric cave together, a pair of early humans bonded against a predatory outside world.

Will shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose, rebuilding the wall that had cracked. It had been breached with terrifying ease. All he'd had to do was read one letter, one fucking letter, and Hannibal was back in his head.

He picked up the box and held it for a moment, imagining himself tossing it on the fire.

Then, Will opened the box.

He'd already read one letter. Jack had visited, bringing the past with him. What was the harm of reading the others if he'd already been reinfected?

Will picked up the first letter with shaky fingers.

Dear Will,

What a pleasant surprise to see you in court today. I hadn't been informed when you'd be giving your testimony. You carried yourself with confidence and spoke well. Hard to believe you once were unable to comfortably make eye contact. I hope you're well and healthy and recovering from your injuries. If you were prescribed physical therapy, be sure to do your exercises daily to ensure rehabilitation. If you happen to stop into the Crawdad Hole, please send Lurlene my regards. One thing I will certainly miss is her Sazeracs.

Sincerely, Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Will closed his eyes, crumpling the paper gently in his hand for a moment as he forced himself to breathe. Hannibal knew that all of his correspondence would be read by Alana and Chilton. The missive seemed banal on the surface, but had layers of meaning attached, of course. Hannibal wanted him to think about the day they'd met, and what they'd done together that night. Something that could have been written off as a drunken folly, and left at that, but had instead opened a gateway to a beautiful and horrifying circle of Hell, full of pleasure and torment.

Dear Will,

I am curious if you've continued with some form of therapy. Remember the grounding and centering exercises I taught you. Consider your five senses. Count stripes on curtains. Be present in the moment, feeling your feet in your shoes and the floor beneath them. Close your eyes, and try to pick out each individual sound you hear. That just leaves smell and taste, the primordial senses closest to the center of the brain. These are important coping skills for

when you feel overwhelmed. You'll recall how we practiced them. I'm sure you'll continue to find them useful.

Sincerely, Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Dear Will,

Real estate listings show your home in Wolf Trap is for sale. I wonder how much you were forced to disclose to the buyers. As I recall, you were informed of the previous owner's death on the premises. Natural causes, of course. Perhaps they plan to tear it down knowing what happened there. With Mr. Tier, I mean. It can be disconcerting, having one's personal space become a crime scene. I felt that way about my office after the incident with Mr. Budge. Thank you again for driving me home that evening.

Sincerely, Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Dear Will,

I spent most of today drawing La Primavera from memory. It feels as though it were only yesterday that I saw the original in Florence. I had particular trouble with the features of Zephyrus, farthest to the right, the embodied West Wind. He was said to have a dual nature, blowing the sweet spring breeze while harboring a vicious streak. Seneca writes, "Where meadows lie which Zephyrus soothes with his dew-laden breath and calls for the herbage of spring." Though the West Wind was considered by the Greeks to be the sweetest gale, Zephyrus was also a murderer. Have I piqued your interest? Search for the story in Nonnus' Dionysiaca.

Sincerely, Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Dear Will,

Did you find Nonnus' reference to Zephyrus yet? The sweet breath of spring can also destroy. You must have discovered the story by now – there was once a beautiful youth, Hyacinthus, whose charms were coveted by the gods themselves. Apollo won him and Zephyrus was enraged. So jealous was he that he blew a discus off course and killed the young man rather than see him with someone else. Apollo, grief-stricken, turned him into a larkspur flower. I find Keats' retelling to be lovely:

"...pitying the sad death

Of Hyacinthus, when the cruel breath

Of Zephyr slew him; Zephyr penitent,

Who now ere Phoebus mounts the firmament,

Fondles the flower amid the sobbing rain"

Not even the gods have power over death, and can merely supply transformation, it seems. I challenge you next to find the connection between Zephyrus and Achilles.

Sincerely, Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Dear Will,

Look no further than the Iliad. Have you found it yet? Zephyrus was the father of Balius and Xanthus, the mythic horses that pulled Achilles' chariot. Patroclus kept them and tended to them faithfully, and when he donned Achilles' armor and was slain in battle, they stood at the edge of the field and wept. When at last Achilles released Patroclus' body to the funeral pyre, the tinder would not light. Achilles prayed to Zephyrus to help him burn his companion's body, as was proper. The fire blazed all that day and all through the night, quenching itself only when the sun rose again. What does it say about the Greeks, the founders of our western civilization, that so many of their mighty heroes and powerful gods were so often grief-stricken and miserable? I would love to hear your thoughts.

Sincerely, Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Dear Will,

A joyous occasion. Alana has given Margot her Verger baby. A strapping boy — Caspian. Lovely name. The photograph accompanying the birth announcement in the Baltimore Sun was fetching indeed — a happy family for Margot at last. Until I am able to keep my promise to Alana, that is. Mason's assets have been transferred to the boy's guardians until he comes of age, so they will want for nothing. If you happen to see the ladies, please wish them the best for me. I'm sure Alana is over the moon. It is an honor to give someone you love the child they've always wanted.

Sincerely, Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Dear Will,

It seems Daphne Dashiell is making the talk show rounds, but only the ones unable to accommodate Dr. Chilton's schedule or that he feels are below his status. I believe she will be on something called Dr. Phil next week if you'd like to tune in. I'll be interested to see if she discusses the conservatory. Apparently she's fond of telling the story of the dinner party I hosted not long after we caught the kidney thief, Mr. Sylvestri, describing in her own maudlin way how I announced that nothing at the table was vegetarian. She says now that the meat

tasted "off" but she raved about the dish that evening and in her thank-you note the following week. Enclosed is a sketch of "Le Genie du Mal" crowned in oleander.

Sincerely, Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Dear Will,

May I ask after your dogs? I hope they are well. Is Zoe still responding to the medication for her digestive issues? You might try some herbal remedies such as turmeric and ginger if she'll take it with her food. Please enjoy the holiday season and the festivities it brings. I assume you have found your way onto the proverbial "nice list."

Sincerely, Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Dear Will,

Congratulations on your recent nuptials. Many happy returns to both you and Mrs. Graham.

Sincerely, Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Dear Will,

I hope the plates I sent from Tiffany's arrived. Please excuse the lateness of my wedding gift – my lawyers have been dragging their feet. They see it as inadvisable. I've had seven marriage proposals via mail since my incarceration, all from people who would, in my opinion, benefit from therapy. Still, they have kept my pen busy – I think it rude not to at least send a note of polite refusal when one's hand in marriage is requested.

Sincerely, Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Dear Will,

I often hear music in my head when I first awaken in the mornings. Today it was "Liebestod" from Tristan and Isolde, Wagner's take on the ancient legend. In some of the retellings, Isolde is a healer, ancient Ireland's version of a medical doctor. Her attraction to Tristan begins and flourishes as she repeatedly heals him after his battles. Lamentably, the lovers part, and are far away from one another. Tristan marries another woman named Isolde in an attempt to fill the void. He is again wounded, and his new wife is unable to heal him. He sends for his lover, and tells the ship's captain to raise white sails if Isolde is on board, and black if she will not come. As the ship breaches the horizon, Tristan is too weak to rise from his bed. His new wife, in a jealous spite, tells him the sails are black, though they are as white as clouds. Tristan succumbs to his wounds and is just turning cold when his true Isolde arrives. She dies

of a broken heart. The two are buried next to one another. A rose tree grows from Isolde's grave, and a vine from Tristan's. The vine wraps around the tree, and persists, despite being pruned back – a sign the two lovers cannot be parted in death.

Sincerely, Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Dear Will,

How long do you think this uneasy peace can last? How long will it be before Jack comes calling? I am not free, but that will not stop others from creating their designs for you to puzzle out. Jack has gone back to the FBI, assembling the old team – what's left of it – and poured himself into his work with the vigor of a widower. I'm curious what you'll do when the time comes. Please know I'm happy to consult if needed.

Sincerely, Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Dear Will,

I've been meaning to ask – when you journeyed from Lithuania back to Florence, did you spend a night in Poland? A small forest cottage, perhaps?

Sincerely, Dr. Hannibal Lecter

Will dropped the letter, his fingers numb, his brain frozen. How the hell did Hannibal know about his night in the old woman's cottage?

The walls crumbled, the letters reverberating through Will's mind like the trumpets at Jericho. All of his careful masonry, all of the patches and additions, it all collapsed under its own weight once the keystones were removed. All he could see was the Norman Chapel in Palermo, the doors arcing in front of him, stretching to absurd heights, daring him to enter.

"No… no, no, no" Will pleaded in a near-silent whisper. What had he done?

Suddenly furious, Will gathered all of the letters into the cardboard box and threw the entire thing onto the fire. He watched, huddled by the hearth, as the flames consumed it all, reducing even the scraps to ash. Yet the feeling of invasion remained, of tarnish, infection.

Will got unsteadily to his feet and went to the little desk Molly kept in the corner near the window where she did her accounting for the clothing store she owned. He sat in her chair and pulled a half-used yellow legal pad from one of the drawers. Uncapping a ballpoint pen, he began to write, his words slicing into the page, his cramped, uneven handwriting a blatant insult to Hannibal's practiced penmanship.

Dr. Lecter,

You are exactly where you belong. Having been locked up there before – because you framed me – I know what a shithole it is. I know how the food tastes, or rather, how it doesn't.

Did you think it would actually work? Sending me a letter warning me away from Jack and the Tooth Fairy case, hoping I'd get back in with the FBI just to spite you? Reverse psychology is for children. You must have known how pathetic your attempt was, because you had to include the article describing the family of victims, thinking it would pull at my heartstrings. Because I have a family now, right? To tell you the truth, it's just sad. I wouldn't touch this case with a ten-foot pole. Hell, I wouldn't touch it with a pole that was long enough to scratch the fucking moon.

That's the only letter from you I bothered to open, and only because Jack stopped by. Everything else you sent me I burned without reading. And we returned the plates, by the way, and donated the money to a charity that provides psychiatric care for the families of murder victims.

Since you're so curious about my life, why don't I tell you about it? Let's start with my wife. Molly came from nothing and fought her way to success. She is relentlessly optimistic and doesn't know what it's like to be tired or beaten down by life. Even after losing her first husband to cancer, and being left alone with Walter, she persevered.

I met Molly and Walter at the veterinary oncologist's office. I was there with Max for his annual scan. They'd brought in Ryker, their golden retriever, and found out he was terminal. Ryker was actually Austin's dog, the puppy that had outlived him, and was dying now of the same thing. They elected to put him down that day.

Walter was inconsolable and Molly was trying to talk him through it. I couldn't believe how wonderful she was with him, validating his feelings while still giving him hope. But I could see she was about to lose it. So I let Max loose on purpose and he went right over to them. There was baseball on the waiting room TV, and I got Walter talking about it, and petting Max, and that gave Molly a chance to break down for a bit while he was distracted. We exchanged numbers with the pretense of meeting up to discuss her adopting a foster I'd been working with.

We took it slow. She'd lost Austin 4 years prior, and I didn't want to make any of the same mistakes I made with you, including jumping into bed.

But it was impossible for anything with Molly to be a mistake. I figured that out pretty damn fast. After a year, we decided to get married. She's a practical woman — neither of us were getting any younger, and Walter needed a dad. I've never agreed to anything so fast in my life.

I didn't need to think it over. I wasn't holding back because of you.

There was no need for presentation or fuss or ceremony, all the things you would have thought of. A simple courthouse wedding with a reception after at a nature preserve. A few of Molly's people from Iowa came. Most of the guests were Austin's family. Took some of them

awhile, but once they got past all the Tattlecrime bullshit, they approved of me. My dad and Aunt Louise showed up. It was good. It was wholesome and uncomplicated and I felt blessed. I FEEL blessed. I got a second chance, or a third one — who the hell's keeping score?

I am completely out of law enforcement. I work around town as a mechanic and handyman, and I buy and refurbish boats. Depending on our schedules, we board dogs at our acreage. And yes, we take in strays. All of my dogs are healthy and happier than they've ever been to have two new people to love.

Molly grew up fishing and Walter loves it. He's taught me a thing or two. His birth father was his hero — is his hero, and should be. I have no illusions about replacing Austin Foster. He feels like a friend that I have memories of but never met. It's an honor to help take care of his boy, and I will do right by him.

Have you met the old man in cell 3 of my former block? The old timer who thinks you're a demon? That's your future. Slowly succumbing to dementia in that place, the indignity of institutionalized old age. You'll be all alone, talking to the walls on the day I die in my bed, at home, with my wife at my side, Walter and his family nearby. I will have grandchildren I will teach to fish while you try to cling to the crumbling rooms of your memory palace.

I'm going to send you this letter, and you will never hear from me again. I don't think about you, and I'll be damned if I'm going to start now.

Will put the pen down and tore the pages from the pad. He stuffed them in an envelope and sealed it. That was when the shaking started. Tremors attacked his hands, making the letter quiver in his fingertips. His breath burned in his lungs and his skin prickled with waves of heat. Beneath his muscle, his chest felt hollow, as if it contained a cold, unfeeling cosmos within, the light of stars in rigor.

Dizzy. He sank onto the sofa and dragged his arm over his brow. As the fibers of his sweater touched the scar on his forehead, it suddenly sang to life, radiating a sharp phantom anguish as if the wound was fresh. The scar on his abdomen joined it, intensifying the sensation. Hannibal had used anesthesia before cutting into his head, but he still had the sense-memory of the gutting, and he could feel the knife in him now. Will snatched up the hem of his sweater, suddenly convinced he was bleeding.

Nothing. Just his scar in the firelight.

Will panted quivering breaths, desperate for air. He fell to his knees, and threw his letter in the fireplace along with the ashes of the others, as if it was a cursed thing in need of immediate purification.

Stumbling, he made his way out of the house and onto the porch, habit reminding him not to bang the screen door. He sank onto the steps and put his head in his hands, the icy winter air pouring down his throat and quenching the worst of the panic that threatened to choke him. The sweat on his brow cooled, and the scars' acute anguish soothed into a dull ache.

The frantic static in his head bled away, and he could think again. He was relieved until the clarity allowed him to make sense of the flashes of memory that were now free to circulate through his consciousness.

Reading me like one of your killers?

Then come back to my bed, where you should have stayed.

We've been here for over an hour, and you haven't tried to kiss me yet.

More afternoons like this.

That sweet and easy peace exists… stop fighting, and I'll show it to you.

I needed you tonight, Will.

There is no word for what we have.

I do enjoy our duets, don't you?

So many sweet things you've said.

Now do you understand that I don't see you as broken?

God saw fit to make you beautiful as well. A barbed gift, as He will not let you see it.

When something is forbidden, it increases desire.

I care for you, in a way I have to admit is more powerful than any I've ever experienced.

I have faith in you.

Do you want me, Will?

I miss you, Will.

You bring me immense pleasure, Will. You always have.

You're better each time.

You would have been haunted by me.

Would you like to hear my composition?

It is one of the great joys of my life to watch you gain true understanding of yourself. To see your potential come true.

Your palate grows more refined by the day.

There are many things you can do that Alana Bloom can't.

Why did you ask me that day, Will?

Release your burdens, and I'll release mine.

We're leaving together.

Catch me if you can, Will.

The world, ours.

Better to live true to yourself for an instant than never know it.

If I saw you every day, forever, I would remember this time.

Are you hungry, Will?

Are you pleased, Will?

Will.

Will.

Will.

He sank to the rough-hewn planks of the porch and curled up in a defensive position, hugging his limbs in close and squeezing his eyes shut. He was drowning again, submerged in dark waters. The tide of memory was relentless, pulled by the changeable moon, rising and falling, leaving him just enough time to catch his breath before the next memory cascaded into his mind.

He spoke brokenly, his voice hollowed out, brittle like a cicada's abandoned shell, his breath thin and trembling. " *Hannibal…* "

My letter was woven through with sins of omission, he imagined himself writing in a post-script, pen flying across the page. *I saved all the letters. I didn't read them right away, but I did read them. Then I burned them. I don't want you anywhere near Walter and Molly, even if it's just a box of papers with your handwriting. The rest of what I wrote to you is true, just a very limited narrative of my reality.*

I am in awe of my wife. She deserves better than me. Molly is just how I described. What I didn't tell you is that our sex life is perfunctory and passionless. I'm not Austin, and she's not you. The best part is when we can hold each other after, and feel safe. Not lonely, not abandoned. Safe, with a partner who cares. There's usually a dog or two in the bed.

Again, I didn't lie. I just left out the part where Walter is unsure of me, even after two years. He wants to protect Molly above all else. I understand I will never be his father. I don't blame him at all. He has been and still is wary of me. He heard the things his father's people said about me when Molly and I first started dating, things they'd read on Tattlecrime. They were understandably concerned for Molly and Walter and didn't want me around. Walter internalized some of that. I don't think he entirely trusts me, and I'm not sure he ever will. He

asks me to wait down the block when I pick him up from school. When we're home alone together, we don't talk. We watch baseball in silence.

And when Molly asked me to marry her, and I told you that I didn't hesitate, didn't need to think it over? I didn't hold back because of you. I was hasty because of you. I was in a rush to move on and save myself from you. I thought this was the way to do it.

Still, it's a good life I have. I am taken care of, and I am given the opportunity to care for others. A family, at long last.

But Hannibal, it's not what I want, not really.

And while I respect and admire Molly, and feel genuine affection for her, I'm not in love with her.

You're the only person I ever loved, and it will never stop.

You're the only person I ever loved, and I will never stop hating myself for it.

You're the only person I ever loved, and even if the Tooth Fairy hadn't come into play, I would have broken down eventually to come for a visit.

And planned your escape.

The truth suffocated him, smothered his good sense, and overwhelmed his brain. Will saw a gathering darkness before his eyes, and fell headfirst into it. It wasn't just Hannibal that had broken in, mounting another successful invasion – it was *everything* , everything he'd been so careful to compartmentalize and forget.

All the murders. Garret Jacob Hobbs, and how righteous it felt to kill him. His grief for Abigail, Georgia, Beverly. Stepping into the minds of the Angel-Maker, the Muralist, every killer in between. The zest, the radiating pleasure of killing Randall Tier. The unmitigated horror embraced him, dark wings folding around his body.

Will leaned into the darkness now, letting it surround his mind. He hugged his midsection, drawing up his knees, trembling, sweating, struggling to breathe, a part of him still valiantly resisting, tearing him apart, his soul drawn and quartered.

He remembered the taste of human flesh.

It tasted good.

***

Will neared the Capella Palatina on foot, bag over his shoulder. He crossed the street and entered the public garden across from the entrance, eyes scanning every corner of it, looking for Hannibal. As usual, he was disappointed.

He turned, hoping to see the kid selling water bottles so he'd have something to drink while he waited all day in the chapel; his day spent looking up with hopeful eyes each time a new

group of people entered with whispering, respectful footfalls.

No kid. In fact, no tour groups, no nuns, no people walking their dogs or making their way to work. No gelato stand, no picnic lunches. The entire area was deserted.

An otherworldly fear gripped him as he turned to the chapel doors. They were closed, but he could see huge iron keys sitting in the locks. All he had to do was turn them and walk inside. This time, he was utterly certain Hannibal was there, waiting, taking in the golden beauty of the mosaics, imagining the roof collapsing on the faithful.

"No," he muttered, dropping his bag on the path at his feet, forgotten. "No, no, no."

This was not the real Norman Chapel; this was the memory palace. The foyer waited, the image of death graven in the floor. Hannibal, patient, listening as a boy soprano sang Mozart's "Alleluja." Waiting for him. Knowing he would come.

The stag appeared at his side, and nudged him forward with an impatient snort, ruffling its raven-black feather-fur.

"No," Will told it, trying to be firm with it, and with himself. "I'm not – I'm not doing this. I can't do this. M-Molly and Walter – I can't!"

With a toss of its head, the creature snorted, a thick ebony smoke rolling from its nostrils. It nudged him again, none too gently, nearly knocking Will off his feet.

He ran. He ran from the stag, and away from the chapel doors, through the park, heading for the streets of Palermo.

But the edge of the garden did not become the streets of a city in Italy. The sidewalk eased into thick grass. Before him opened a lush landscape, an Eden of thriving but twisted trees, ancient, vine-covered masonry, and thick underbrush full of thorns. There was the mirror-lake, doubling the thousands of fireflies that littered the vista.

It was as if someone had dumped all of his memories and dreams into a bowl and mixed them up, pouring them out again in their new arrangement. There was the old woman's cottage in Poland, his house in Wolf Trap as a tree stand, the bower of bones and funeral flowers. Rawlings Conservatory, the Palm House and outdoor statue garden with the vine-curtained bench, and, of course, Castle Lecter rising from the cliffs above, jutting into the sky to pierce the looming moon, skirted by swaths of stars and nebulas, the arms of the universe twisting endlessly in the sacred spiral. Directly in front of him was the angel fountain that crawled with snails, the basin at the bottom murky with primordial ooze.

The stag was behind him now, nudging his upper back again.

"No." He turned and faced it, squaring his shoulders, even as tears gathered in his eyes. "I didn't s-spend three years locking him out just to go back. I didn't spend three years forgetting, dismantling my empathy… piece by piece, just to… to sew it all together again… like Frankenstein's monster and-and bring it back to life."

The stag snorted, pawing the ground with one razor-edged hoof, tearing up the turf. Worms squirmed below in the black dirt, fattened on the corpses Hannibal had left behind, the parts he hadn't eaten, and the remains of those he had yet to kill, murders stretching out into the future and bending back as time and space folded in on themselves.

He ran again, and he could hear the stag pursuing him, thundering dully over the lush thickets of grass. Will made it past the old woman's cottage, but skidded to a stop when he emerged from a scar of forest to see an icy beach in front of him, gray waves pounding the cold sands, the human totem pole rising up against the black sky.

The stag was right behind him. Will scrambled up and over the dunes. He would rather drown than face it, let the water cover his head and flow into his nose and mouth, burning his eyes with cleansing salt, the ocean's saline banishing him like a spell.

He realized too late that he was being herded toward the totem. Stumbling, he managed to get back to his feet only to have the stag knock him off balance. Will caught himself against the rotting flesh of the monolith, his fingers curling around the livid, twisted bodies. He spun around just in time for the stag to ram its antlers right at his chest. They had grown nightmarishly large, and instead of impaling him, they caged him against the old man's legacy, trapping him in place with his back pressed up against the dismembered corpses, their sweet stench invading his nostrils along with the frigid ocean air.

Will's arms were trapped at his sides. He bent his elbows and managed to get his hands around the lower tier of antlers. Gasping out intermittent wordless noises of terror and disgust, he braced his back against the spongy rotten flesh behind him and pushed, trying to free himself. Fresh blood flowed from the bodies where the antlers pierced them, and it oozed down over his shoulders and soaked his clothing, sliding in warm trails down his neck and pooling in the hollow of his throat.

"Let go," he begged. "Let me go, please– stop–"

To his great surprise and relief, the stag obeyed, stepping back, its antlers shrinking back to their normal proportions. Will fell on his knees, feverishly swiping at his neck, trying to wipe the blood away.

The stag snorted, lifting its head as if giving him a look of reproach. Then it opened its jaws and bit him, closing its nightmare teeth around his left arm above the elbow. Will cried out and it echoed along the beach before being absorbed in a roll of thunder. The stag dragged him to his feet and back the way they'd come. Will tried to pull away, but the pain was blinding. He could feel every individual tooth snagged into his flesh, and his blood poured from between the creature's lips in great founts that left him too weak to fight.

His forced march ended in the sculpture garden of the Rawlings Conservatory. The Palm House was ancient in the dream-world, its windows nothing but jagged glass, the iron rusted, the entire place twisted with vines, the plants within breaking free of their confines. The place crawled with fireflies, snails, spiders, and great feathery moths, the bright butterflies long dead.

The stag bore him to the statue of greatest prominence in the botanical garden, its orderly beds now overgrown and full of roses with enormous black thorns, some curved like claws. It was Le Genie du Mal, but the devil sat with his wings folded entirely around his body from the waist up. The chain around his ankle was made of the same thorny vines that drooped with bloody red flowers, their scent sickly sweet, the combined essence of love and death, dark and stark against the statue's white stone.

The stag released him with a toss of its head, depositing him on the damp earth on his knees at the statue's feet.

He knew those ankles, legs, knees. Even carved in stone, he would know them anywhere.

Slowly, the bat-like wings opened, their stone edifice cracking and falling away in flakes, dust, and pebbles, revealing leathery flesh beneath. Spiderwebs of cracks opened over the surface of the statue, fissures gaping wide. And then Lucifer stood and stretched his wings, leaving a pile of broken marble in his wake.

It wasn't Lucifer, of course. It was Hannibal as Le Genie du Mal, the way he might draw someone else's face and form in a classical painting, casting them in that particular symbolic role. He took a step towards Will, stretching out his full wingspan as thunder boomed overhead. The chain of roses snapped easily as he moved, straightening his posture, reclaiming Lucifer's bright and sharp-edged pride, tossing away the broken scepter and crown with a disdainful flick of his wrist. The black drape around his waist fluttered in the storm's insistent wind, as did his long, textured hair. His eyes were black from center to lashes like polished onyx, reflecting the cold stars above.

"Will," he said.

Will lowered his head, palms on the slick grass. "Wake up," he pleaded with himself. "Wake up, wake up, wake up…"

"Will," came the voice again, deep and rumbling, layered as if every time Hannibal had said his name, in anger and in tenderness, in reverence and in pain, sounded from his lips at the same time.

Against his better sense, Will raised his head and sat back on his heels. The fallen angel stood before him now with a hand outstretched. Hannibal's fingers, warm and pliable, no longer stone, but tipped with black claws, cupped the side of his face, drawing upward to raise his chin. Will's body trembled, but he lifted his gaze to meet the demon's.

"Fallen Cherub, to be weak is miserable, doing or suffering. But of this be sure; to do good never will be our task; but ever to do ill our sole delight, as being contrary to his high will Whom we resist." Hannibal smiled benevolently down at him, flexing the hideous wings higher as lightning split the somehow cloudless sky.

"Please," Will whispered as Hannibal's warm hand caressed his cheek, thumbing away the tear that fell. "No."

Lucifer's smile deepened, revealing straight but deformed teeth, the canines long and sharp. "Which way I fly is Hell – myself am Hell – and in the lowest deep a lower deep, still threatening to devour me, opens wide, to which the hell I suffer seems a heaven."

Will couldn't stop his arm from raising, his hand closing into Hannibal's. The prince of Hell drew him upward until he stood, and then clasped Will's other hand in his brimstone grip.

"Will," he said softly. "They've already cast us out. There is no going back." He released one of his hands to brush Will's hair away from his forehead. "They adore me on the throne of Hell."

Will felt the little pieces of his resolve that remained crumbling to ash. They scattered to the West Wind, to Zephyrus. He wanted to say yes. He wanted to kneel at the throne. He wanted to love the Devil.

Will stepped into Hannibal's waiting arms. Lucifer's embrace was warm and fragrant, welcoming and familiar. It was home. Will buried his face in his shoulder and shuddered in relief, his heart settling in his chest, beating now a sure rhythm, a syncopated supplication.

Giving in felt so fucking good.

The leathery wings closed around him, but instead of having the texture of dry, lizard-like skin, or a creature's scales, they were supple as antler velvet, carrying with them Hannibal's scent. The fallen angel spoke, and Will could hear his words through his flesh and in the air.

"So farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear. Farewell remorse: all good to me is lost. Evil be thou my good; by thee at least divided empire with heaven's King I hold. By thee, and more than half perhaps will reign." He drew Will gently from himself and put a hand on his cheek. "As man ere long, and this new world shall know."

They each leaned in for the kiss. Will felt the tears running down his face, but he knew they were born of relief and reunion.

When the wings folded back, Will's bite wound from the stag was gone. The caked on sand and blood from the monolith had disappeared, and he was dressed as Zephyrus in a flowing blue-black tunic, the color of the west just after the sun had disappeared below the horizon…

… I have him now. My Will.

I let him come to me of his own volition.

Even in the dreamworld, he cannot escape me. Doesn't wish to. In the end, the stag brought us together. The embodiment of our connection. Antlers piercing flesh put us in each other's orbit. In Arthurian myth, the white stag was the grace of God, perpetually hunted but never captured. St. Eustace saw a cross appear between its antlers and abandoned his pagan ways, becoming the patron saint of, among other things, victims of torture. Our ebony creature subverts the white hart entirely.

We are creatures of mixed myth now, an Anemoi and the Devil, in the world of our making.

I am certain that I will see Will in the flesh before the month is over. It will be far longer than that before I can hold him as I do now, pressed against me, his arms around my neck, my hand on the back of his head and over the rise of his backside where it sweeps into the top of his pelvic bone. But the day will come, I am sure of it.

Now, I lift him into my arms as I did when we escaped Muskrat Farm, and carry him to the bower of bones to stretch him out on the bed of flowers beneath. I lean in and he pushes himself up greedily to catch my kiss, eyes closed to savor the sensation. I let my wings and our clothing dissolve. I appear to him now as he would know me, and he is my imago once more. We lock together, fitting as we should, each of us desiring the perfect connection.

He moves over me now, and gives me a smile of ecstatic disbelief to see my features restored to the face he knows and loves. I curl my hand into his hair, stroke the space between his shoulder blades, feeling for the knife scar I have kissed so many times. I should make him beg. I should make him get on his knees and worship me and plead for me to take him back. I should make him tell me how gray and colorless his life is without me, have him shovel spoonfuls of sustenance into the mouth of my pride and ego. When I see him again in the daylight, I will exact my pound of flesh.

But here, now, in this place of our making, I have no appetite for it. I only want him, to have him in his entirety, mind, body, blood, breath, down to the carbon of his atomic structure that links him to the birth of the universe, stardust, golden.

I tuck him beneath me once more, drawn to his throat, where I kiss and graze my teeth, but only to make him shudder and gasp and work his fingers against my skin as if he could pull us any closer together. We can be closer, and our bodies know it.

My fingers test him. Slicked and hot and ready to receive me, to host me again after all this time. I position myself and slide in until we are interlocked. He is pressed into my stomach and I can already feel the beads of moisture gathering at the head, wetting my skin where we touch. I spread his legs further and lean back to look down at him, feeling my love flood my heart and drown the anger and pain that has been simmering in me for three long years. I can only say his name; no other words will form from my lips. My hand finds the satin skin of the underside of his thigh as I rest inside of him, cradled by his inner anatomy. I caress him here and slide my hand higher to catch beneath his knee, then brace myself for the initial thrust. His breath halts in anticipation.

"Hannibal," Will whispers.

He tips his head back and cries to Heaven, even though we are in Hell, our hell, our private piece of paradise lost. I am hilt-deep in him, my breath catching, uneven. I fold at the waist and rest my hands on the soft bed of flowers and fragrant grasses beneath us, then bend my elbows, gathering his hair in my hand, stroking his neck with the other. Kissing him. I can't stop. He folds his legs around me, clutching desperately at my back.

"Love me," I plead with him, unable to keep up even a shred of my commanding facade, any sliver of dignity. "I will give you anything and everything you ever wanted."

“I do,” he says through a moan as I thrust again. “I always have, don’t you know that?”

“Every part of me,” I warn him, even as he is poised to promise. “Because of what I am, not in spite of it. I will always be a killer, Will. I cannot reverse my becoming any more than you can reverse yours.”

“The teacup doesn’t come back together.” Will strokes my hair and kisses me, moaning into my mouth as I drive deep within him again.

I gather his head between my hands, pressing my tongue in for a moment as deep as the rest of me seems to go. Pulling back, I stroke his hair, rotating my hips to pleasure inside of him. “Are you afraid?”

“Yes,” he admits. “But I don’t care.”

I pull out, nearly entirely, and then push back in after an unexpected pause. The way he throws his head back, angling his chin to the star-seeded sky, is disastrously beautiful, wanton. “Show me,” I whisper against his cheek and ear.

Will relaxes at my request, still breathing hard. He lets the tension sap out of his body and releases me, the backs of his hands resting just above his shoulders, cradled by the flowers and sweet grasses beneath us. I cradle his hips and lift them onto my thighs, changing the angle as I kneel here, worshiping him. He digs his hands into the foliage, stroking the flower petals and blades of satiny grass, exhaling deep breaths of pleasure as I thrust into him, letting me lift and move us together as I wish.

The wind blows from the west, carrying with it heady scents of spring; lilac and lily of the valley.

My desires suddenly change, and I lift him to me, first sliding a hand behind his head, then pulling him up by his shoulders, wrapping him in a tight embrace. He clings to me now, flower petals stuck in his hair.

“I want you inside,” I say. “Come in, Will.”

He nods eagerly against my cheek and I release him, pulling out with a little sigh. He climbs on top, takes himself in his hand and pushes inside of me with an ease that can only be found in dreams. And we are together again, key and lock, lock and key, made to open one another.

He shifts me higher and loops his arm underneath my leg, watching me, hawk-like, to see if he is pleasuring me internally. “There?”

“Yes,” I sigh, burying my hand in his hair as he leans over me, arching my other arm back and letting it rest, the same submission he showed me.

The west wind shifts from warm to cold and back again, gusting more powerfully now, blowing flower petals down on us from the bower above. As Will nears his finish, it grows in power from gust to gale, whipping the fireflies into a vortex above us. Even as I orgasm I marvel at the spectacle and see it for what it is – a moment of art that Will created for me.

He collapses on me, breathing hard, but only rests a moment before he gathers me to him and kisses me with a three-year fervor…

…. And then Will breaks away. He looks down at Hannibal, then swiftly in all directions, as if just now realizing what this is, where he's been, what he's done, and with whom. "No," he whispers.

Hannibal takes Will's jaw in his hand and forces the eye contact, squeezing to the point of pain. "Don't," he orders, eyes alight. "Don't you dare berate yourself for this wickedness. This is who you are, Will. This is who I am, and who we are together."

"I can't," Will murmurs, tears in his eyes.

"You can," Hannibal promises him. "And you will." He pushes himself up on his elbows and snags Will by the hair in a possessive, twisting grip. "And this new world shall know."

"God…" Will prays.

"Can't help you. You've already turned your back," Hannibal says with a soft, loving smile.

A bone-chilling cold climbs up Will's body from his toes to his chest. His hands are numb, shaking, and he can't get his breath.

"Wake up, Will," Hannibal says, kissing him. "You'll drown yourself."

***

Will woke up in waist-deep water.

Somehow, he'd walked directly into the small river that flowed through the acreage. Chunks of ice and snow-covered logs drifted past, and his breath curled from his mouth in a thick fog. It was dawn, the snow blushed with it, yet the weak sun provided no warmth.

This was not as disconcerting a moment as it could be. Will had, for a series of months, woken up in strange places, not knowing how he'd gotten there. His brain remembered how to deal with the disorientation. First thing to do was assess clear and present danger. Get out of the river.

He waded to shore as cautiously as he could, then padded with numb feet through the snow back to the house. Molly and Walter were still asleep. The dogs were stirring in their kennels, but he ignored them, heading straight to the shower to thaw himself out.

After letting the pack out, Will wrapped himself in several blankets and huddled near the rebuilt fire. He extended one shaking hand from his quilt cocoon and thumbed open his phone. Selecting Jack Crawford's number, he pressed the green call button, and raised the phone to his ear.

He had to do it. For the families, of course.

... and CUT!

When we next see Will, he is reconstructing the crime at the Leeds house. He is quickly sucked (heh) back into his old life at the FBI, showing up at the crime lab, and activating the ambient pulse of his empathy disorder to try and catch the Tooth Fairy. At the end of the episode he says, "There is something else I can do. I can wait until I'm driven to it by desperation in the last days before the full moon, or I can do it now, while it might be of some use… it's a mindset I need to recover. I have to see Hannibal." It took Will like… a couple of hours tops to decide that he couldn't solve it on his own and needed to see Hannibal. Mmm-hmm…

... stay tuned!

Season 3 Episode 9: And the Woman Clothed With the Sun...

Chapter Summary

Will's back on the case and staying in Baltimore. Julien Honoré pays a visit.

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “Good Luck” by Broken Bells

“Yeah, the face
The face of evil is on the news tonight
We see the darkness over light
But have we ever really lived in better times?
Hey, strange, they say we're coming to the end of the line
But is there still a chance to change your mind?
Or have all the colors turned to black and white?
I had another dream, I had another life
No one saw the blood on my hands
When I woke, I was there alone
Where will it end?
After the twilight, always a sunrise
But the blood of morning comes when small arms fire
Ignore the deadline, there's no divine right
Enter the gods and all the sacred signs
At the end of your line
Good luck, my friend
In time it ends
Heads up, dead land
My heart your hands
Good luck, my friend
In time it ends
Heads up, dead land
My heart, your hands”

This scene immediately follows Will’s phone convo with Molly where they discuss… dog balls? Yeah, it’s weird. But it’s clear Molly has a good sense of humor and Will is lonely. Good thing, because he’s about to have company.

“Nothing you’d notice. I’m lonesome.”

Julien Honoré paused outside the cheap motel room, just out of sight of the window. It was open a crack, probably to air out the smell of discount-rate sanitizer and the lingering memory of cigarettes, even though the place was plastered with NO SMOKING signs.

Will Graham spoke again. “Me too,” he said, a hint of hopeful surprise in his voice. Then, “Never mind about his balls.”

He was on the phone with someone. Hearing half the conversation was interesting, to say the least, especially when he followed up with, “I retracted them once when I was a kid. Had to clear a barbed wire fence carrying a stolen watermelon.” Straining his ears, Julien could hear the tinny laughter coming from the phone as whoever Will spoke with expressed their amusement.

There was a pause that had some weight to it. Will said, “I don’t have a criminal mind.” There was a stark tonal shift as the humor bled from his voice like its throat had been cut. A longer pause this time. “We have a *new* new dog,” Will said brightly, desperate, it seemed, for a change of subject. “Yeah. Belonged to one of the families. There was no one… left to claim her. So I claimed her.”

Julien stepped past the window and knocked with one bent finger, hardly more than a tap.

“Goodnight, Molly.” There was a few seconds delay, and then Will Graham opened the door.

Julien was momentarily overwhelmed, struggling with what being in the profiler’s presence really meant to him, and why it was that he wanted nothing more than to pull Will into his arms. He resisted. But Julien had practice hiding his feelings – acting skill was part of the job, same as if he were a politician or a game show host. He flexed his face into his best warm but sensual smile and gave Will the ego boost of a deliberate once-over.

“H-hi,” Will said, tossing his phone on the nearby table. “Come in.”

Julien obliged, parking his wheeled bag near the wall as Will shut the door behind them, taking a moment to secure the window and the curtains. “Sorry about, uh… this place. I know it’s not up to your… usual standards.”

“Did the FBI put you up here?” Julien asked, and Will nodded in the affirmative. A German Shorthaired Pointer got up from her place on the rug and came over to sniff him. Julien knelt and petted the creature appreciatively as Will looked on, his anxious expression easing away as he watched Julien with the dog.

“That’s, ah, Lucy. D-don’t worry, she’s got a crate in the bathroom for tonight.”

“Do you often travel with your dog?” Julien scratched Lucy’s back, then stood up and put his hands in his trouser pockets.

“No,” Will said. “She belonged to… I adopted her. Today, in fact.”

“She’s beautiful.”

Will nodded, rubbing his chin stubble nervously during the awkward pause. “Just a minute. Lucy, come.” He led the dog to the bathroom and into a wire crate, letting her settle in before he shut the door and turned back to Julien. “Can I get you something? I have, ah, whiskey, and water, I guess.”

“Whiskey’s fine.” Julien settled into one of the chairs at the little laminate-topped table and watched Will pour whiskey in a plastic hotel cup.

“Ice?”

“No, thank you.”

Will poured one for himself, and handed Julien his drink before sitting across from him on the edge of the bed. They drank in silence for a moment.

“Thanks for seeing me,” Will said.

“It’s been awhile.” Julien studied him with practiced eyes. Will looked healthier than the last time he’d seen him. He’d put on just a touch of weight, enough to fill out his sunken cheeks. His skin had the kiss of the outdoors, his hair the sheen of someone getting their vitamins. The prominent scar across his forehead was new, as was a smaller one next to his ear, though that one was on its way to fading out.

He was also wearing a gold wedding band.

“Three years,” Will said, spinning the ring on his finger now before draining his whiskey. “I’m… in some trouble. I’m hoping that seeing you will help me think more clearly. It helped last time. Provided some… clarity about a few things.”

“I was hoping to hear from you,” Julien admitted, watching the amber liquid swirl in his plastic cup.

“Bet you say that to all the boys.” Will tried on a thin smile that crumbled easily when Julien looked directly at it.

“I do.” Julien’s tongue stole out from between his lips, tasting the bottom one for the remnants of spirit. “And the girls. But in this case, I mean it.”

Will’s brows knitted. “Why?” Julien couldn’t be sure, but he thought Will sounded afraid of the concept. Well, it scared him too. Enormously.

Julien sighed. “I’m very honest with myself, Will. I’ll take a client’s secret to the grave, but I don’t like hiding behind myself. I step out in the open in every part of my life, or I attempt to.” He inhaled subtly; Will was wearing a different aftershave, something with a chemical tang he wasn’t fond of, but the underlying notes of machine oil, pine, fresh air, leather, amber – they were as familiar as if they’d seen each other yesterday. As impossibly familiar as Maya’s coconut-scented lotion mingling with the cinnamon-citrus of her natural essence. “Our last encounter left something with me.”

Will's brows puckered further in dismay, and he leaned his elbows on his knees to rub his face ruefully. "I was afraid of that," he said.

"Why?"

"I tend to ruin everything I touch." Will pressed his hands to his lips in prayer position for a moment. "Infect it, tarnish it, stain it…"

"Will," Julien said softly. "I'm not *ruined* . I am just… aware. Of you. I've found myself… what's the phrase? Keeping tab. Tabs. Reading about you. Every so often I just… search you online and I don't know why."

"Please don't say *Tattlecrime.* "

Julien half-smiled, a wry but delighted little thing. " *Tattlecrime* ," he said.

"Fucking seriously?" Will muttered, to himself, and maybe to a phantom Freddie Lounds.

Julien laughed gently. "There was an article a few days back about you consulting with the FBI on the Tooth Fairy case. That's how I knew you were back in town. Made me hope for a call. I'm here to find clarity as much as you are. Clients don't often… linger with me."

"I'm sorry," Will said, sitting up and squaring his shoulders. "I shouldn't – maybe this was a bad idea."

"If you think I'm leaving, you're wrong." His tone was gentle, regardless of the words. "I need to understand why I keep thinking about you."
"Like, ah, a fly buzzing around in the back of your head?" Will murmured, tilting his chin slightly, the soft light of the lamp in the corner making his dark curls into a halo.

" *Exactement* ," Julien replied. "Doesn't matter where I go, or where you go – it's like you are… *walking* with me."

"I know the feeling." Will got up to pour another whiskey, offering the bottle Julien's direction. He declined.

"Safe to say, though," Julien said, "you're not haunted by me. That feeling of being followed doesn't extend my way."

"No," Will spun the ring on his finger again.

"You can take it off, if you'd like."

Will looked at Julien's hands. "You're wearing yours," he said.

Julien glanced down at the platinum band. "I always wear mine. It's like a second skin. A reminder of who I go home to."

"He knows what you do?"

“She does,” Julien corrected smoothly. “She does *not* know I’m here tonight, however. It’s the first time I’ve lied to her.”

“Why?” Will rubbed his hand over his hair, then smiled, though it looked more like a wound. “I’m guessing she’s googled me too, huh?”

Julien nodded. “I can’t describe to her exactly why I’m here, knowing who you are and… what you’re mixed up with. I’m fully aware it’s a terrible idea. But I need to understand.”

“I’d love to help you, but I barely understand myself half the time,” Will said. He spun the ring one more time, then slid it off his hand, setting it on the nightstand next to his wallet and watch. “My wife… it’s not… she’s not…” He bit his bottom lip and looked away, then ran his tongue over the bitten place before locking eyes with Julien again. Julien was impaled on the sadness of that blue-green gaze. “She’s not my primary relationship.”

“I understand that,” Julien said. “I certainly don’t judge you for it.”

“That makes one of us,” Will muttered, draining his cup again.

“Every family loves differently. Every love is unique.” Even as Julien said the words, he was at a loss to know why he’d said them, though they made sense in context. He simply couldn’t remember thinking of them before his lips formed the syllables. “Sometimes we deny our love for others because of what it might mean about us.”

“You want to know,” Will said, “what it means for you.”

Julien reeled for a moment. He’d never put the feeling to words, and it was terrifying. It had been like he’d loved Will Graham from afar for three years, hoping against all forces of circumstance to see him again. But that made no sense whatsoever. It was one night. They’d spent one night together, and it was for work. “I want to *understand* . I don’t understand. Every once in a while I have a dream where I’m with you. But I am not myself. I’m someone else.”

“Who are you?” Will’s eyes were shining with gathering tears. “Who are you, Julien?” he prompted when he did not receive an answer right away.

“Someone very… cold. Someone who doesn’t think like I think. Being in his head, in his skin, it feels…” Julien shook his head, crossing his arms over himself. “It doesn’t feel like my dream anymore.”

“How often does it happen?”

“Once in a great while. Only a few times since I saw you last, but they stick with me. The feelings more than what I actually see.”

Will swallowed. Julien watched his throat work. “Uh, how does it make you feel?”

“It starts… normally, I suppose. I don’t realize I’m dreaming. I am myself. Dreaming the normal dreams – stress at work, a bad memory, or something nice. Then I feel a tiny… connection. Something attached to me. It’s like an itch I can’t scratch. Like I want to wake up

and scratch it, but I can't. I can't even tell you where it is on my body. It stings. I want it to stop. I'm being shown something I shouldn't see. But I can't look away. Sometimes I wake up and I can't move my body for several minutes. Maya – my wife – she says it's sleep paralysis." Julien shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. I don't understand it. The only thing I'm sure of is that I see you in the dream. And I feel…" Julien shook his head. He reached up and rubbed the back of his neck with a lost sigh. "Not like myself," he finished. "Like I stepped into someone else that was looking at you, or for you. Hitchhiking, almost."

Julien leaned back, exhausted from his confession, crossing his legs. "I'd take that drink now," he said with a beleaguered smile.

"Sure." Will poured it for him, then sat across from him at the little table, resting his elbows on its careworn faux-wood surface. He moistened his lip and only glanced at Julien after he'd finished speaking. " *Where* are you? In the dreams?"

"I don't always remember. Once it was in, perhaps, the woods? There were trees, a castle, and fireflies all over. Another time I was inside a golden church."

"God," Will muttered into his hand as he rubbed his face.

"Does that mean something to you?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I-I don't– I don't understand this any better than you do."

"Please." Julien put his hand over Will's on the table. The touch seemed to startle him; he could feel Will tensing to pull away before stopping himself. "You have to know something. You're not treating me like I'm crazy, so something must make sense to you."

"It does. In a way, I guess. I, uh… I have something wrong with me," Will said, pulling his hand free and sitting back. "It's an empathy disorder. See, when we're young children, we have the ability to empathize deeply with anyone, regardless of if they're… good, or… not. Most of the time that allows us to adapt to the adults in our environment so we socialize the way they do, which should mean we socialize well with the group we live in."

"Children mimic their parents, or the adults around them, yes," Julien agreed quickly, hoping Will would get to the point faster.

"Right, so the part of your brain that makes you do that – they're called mirror neurons. As you get older and your identity forms, they dry up – cement becomes concrete. Mine… didn't. Or, most of them didn't. I formed, but I'm still… malleable. I can empathize with anyone–"

"Regardless of if they're good or not." Understanding blossomed within Julien's mind, but it was an ugly flower, full of thorns and squirming with insects.

"Right. I used to think it was a one-way street. I empathize with people, and they leave a mark on me, a stain, a piece of themselves in me. Part of the connection lingers. But I'm starting to wonder if sometimes I… leave something behind, too."

“And that’s what makes you effective in your work.”

“And what makes *you* effective in *yours* ,” Will said.

Julien was too stunned to speak.

“You don’t have it as bad as me,” Will told him, “but you have it. Why do you think, ah, your clients… are so satisfied? You know exactly what they want. Sometimes they don’t even have to ask.”

“ *Mon Dieu* ,” Julien murmured, then, before he could stop himself “Will, what have you done?”

“I don’t know any more than what I just told you.” Will got to his feet, pacing to the end of the bed and back, rubbing his thumbnail over his lip. “I’m sorry. I was – weak that night, and I shouldn’t have–” He sighed, tossing out a frustrated hand. “I don’t know.”

Julien got to his feet as well. He went to his bag and opened the top zipper, sliding out a tabloid. Flipping through it, he folded the page, and showed the picture to Will. It was a professional headshot of Hannibal Lecter, likely used for his journal publications. It was below a pair of photos of Will coming out of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane and a headline that read MURDER HUSBANDS BACK IN ACTION.

“This is him, isn’t it?” Julien asked softly.

“That’s Hannibal Lecter. A murderer I helped put away,” Will said, though his voice was tight and wary. “The Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Mid to late forties. Silver-brown hair. Brown eyes. It says here he’s Lithuanian but grew up in France. Penchant for three-piece suits?”

“Can you put that thing away?” Will demanded, turning his face from the copy of *Tattlecrime.*

Julien obliged, tossing it in the trash can. “He’s who you wanted me to be, isn’t it? The night we were together.”

Will passed a weary hand over his brow. “Yes,” he said in a small voice.

Julien’s skin crawled, but he felt a warmth rising to his cheeks and a stirring in his groin. “Why?” He said it just above a whisper, as not to raise the level of tension in the room. This was dangerous enough as it was.

Will’s lip trembled, sweat gathering on his brow, beading over the white line of scar tissue. He unbuttoned the cuffs of his dark charcoal dress shirt, shoving them up to his elbows, an unconscious reaction. “I met him,” he said at last, “before I knew he was the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Julien’s eyes went wide. “You fell for him. You didn’t know, and you had feelings…?”

Will took a shaky breath. “And… because of what I am, and what my brain can do… even *after* I knew what he was…”

“Oh, Will.” Julien shook his head. “I’m so… it must have… destroyed you.”

“I thought,” Will went on, as if he hadn’t spoken, “if I was with you, if I could trick my brain, maybe I could get it… I don’t know, out of my system or something. But it just made me realize that I couldn’t. I never could. It’s… permanent. The thing I have with him. I’m sorry I dragged you into my world, Julien, I should have known better. And now I – I did something to you. I don’t know if I can undo it.”

Julien sighed, and closed his eyes to briefly pass a hand over his brow. “I’m sure it was… unintentional. Whatever this thing is. But I need a space to try and adapt to it if I’m going to live with it for… maybe always.”

“Adaptation is… part of the natural world.” Will tried on a weak smile. He went to the table for another drink of whiskey. “Adapt now so you can, uh… mutate later, I suppose. Evolve or die.” He swallowed half the pour in one go.

“Learn to live with it,” Julien agreed, “until it goes away. If it goes away.”

“I think you should stop reading about me,” Will suggested as Julien came closer. The tension in the air shifted, the silence between words hitting a different note, changing keys.

“Tried that,” Julien told him, inching closer still. “Doesn’t work.”

“It doesn’t scare you? What I do? All the… murders? Murderers? People like the Tooth Fairy?”

“Of course it does,” Julien said. “But I don’t consider them at all. Just you.” He reached out and put a hand behind Will’s head, drawing it forward along his neck, then lifting it to cup the stubbled cheek. Will took him by the wrist, but his grip was gentle.

“This is… not the way to get me out of your head,” Will said. He pressed back, as if he would pull away, but Julien stepped forward a few inches and kept his grip, fingers weaving into the curls at the base of his neck.

“There’s something you need to know,” Julien confessed, running his thumb along the soft skin below Will’s left eye. “The Chesapeake Ripper – or your version of him, whatever it is I stumbled into – he loves you, Will. To the point of pain.”

Will scoffed. “You must be, ah, picking up on my projected *imago* , then.” Julien let his eyes and the silence ask the question. “He doesn’t… he can’t. Not with what he is. He feels the… fondness of a shepherd raising lambs to slaughter. Things, people… they either amuse him or they don’t.” He took a steadying breath. “I think there’s an obsession, because of my mind. And a fondness, but…”

“Will.” The name leaving his lips was as tender as any kiss. “Stop.”

Will shut his mouth but stared at him intently, stained glass eyes full of hope and despair.

“I saw the crime scene photos, the ones that leaked online. I know what this man is capable of. And if you’d asked me before I met you I’d say it doesn’t make any sense, but I feel something human in there. I don’t want to understand it. I’m only telling you about this thing you did to me.”

The truth lightened Julien’s body, bringing a giddy nervousness to each of his limbs. He reached out with a quivering hand. Will slowly clasped Julien’s fingers in his warm grip. The innocent touch felt like fire in his veins. He could feel his breath filling every part of him as it quickened another notch when Will came closer. Will lifted their hands, fingers twined, and pressed the connected limbs against his own heart, eyes dark, glinting in the dim lamplight. The threatened snow had started outside, icy pellets tapping the glass, and they breathed in the space of this sound and their silence.

At last, Julien reached forward, and Will stepped into his embrace, winding the fingers of his free hand behind Julien’s neck, sliding them along the base of his hairline. Julien pulled him closer by the small of his back, and their bodies notched together, the back of an arrow fitting into a bow string. Julien closed his eyes and leaned forward, sensing through his touch that Will was doing the same.

This kiss was different than when their lips had touched for the first time, which had been pure pleasured nerves and deadly excitement. This was woven with significance and the weight of three years of waiting. Will’s kiss was halting, tentative, feather light at first before Julien pressed more tightly into him, letting go of his hand to trail his fingers along the side of Will’s face. Will responded to his encouragement, lips still shy, though his body seemed confident enough. He wrapped his warm hand around Julien’s arm just above the elbow and applied a gentle but insistent force, as if he was worried Julien might pull away.

As if he wanted to be anywhere else, anywhere else in the entire world, God no. This felt like coming home, to this man he’d only ever met once before. Julien did find himself breaking the kiss and opening his eyes, half-expecting it to be someone else in front of him, some changeling revealing its true shape. But it was still Will, looking at him now with earnest eyes and blushed lips, his fingers sliding up into Julien’s hair to feel it slip between them. He made a small sound of assent at the sensation, closing his eyes again, but not before catching a glimpse of Will’s smile, sad but resigned to the moment. Now that they’d started, there was no stopping.

The kiss this time was more assured, and it gathered in passion and intensity as something coiled within each of them seemed to unwind. *Yes, it’s real.*

Granted this knowledge, Will kissed him harder now, slowly opening the dam that held back his voracity, then slowed, as if tempering himself. Or savoring. Julien disengaged for a few moments, taking a silent pause to look at Will, then pressed forward again, gathering Will into his arms and kissing his neck from the bottom of his ear to his collarbone, willfully drowning in his scent. Julien heard Will moaning softly, felt, as if far away, his hands gathering palmfuls of the fine fabric of Julien’s shirt as if he planned to tear it. A strand of Will’s hair whispered across his face, a kiss itself.

Will drew back again, and put his hands against the shoulders of Julien’s jacket, the gray and black striped one he’d put on what seemed like days ago. He pushed it a few inches back,

then waited. Julien nodded, and Will slid him free of it. The heavy fabric hit the floor with a soft crumpling noise. Julien's pulse beat against his insides, so hard he imagined that Will must be able to feel it beneath his lips as he kissed Julien's throat in turn, down the side, taking his time, then back up to his mouth. It was a sensation of wonderful drowning, a suffocating death Julien would welcome with open arms, his true self snuffed out and replaced with whatever Will wanted him to be. Needed him to be.

In the darkness of this exquisite breathless place, he could feel Will's hand playing with the buttons at the collar of his shirt, then pausing before pulling them loose. "Yes," he panted impatiently into Will's mouth before it compressed against his lips again. *Yes is the answer to it all,* his mind whispered.

I love you because he loves you.

Julien swept him hard against his body, a strong arm around the small of his back, pressing him in place, his free hand busily unbuttoning the neck of Will's shirt now and kissing him fervently at the same time. It was a tantalizing ordeal, but not effective. At last, they separated a bit, each smiling a little as Julien fumbled with the buttons, freeing them at last. He eased the neck of the shirt open as far as it would go, letting it fall over the edge of Will's smaller frame until one shoulder and part of his chest was exposed. This skin he kissed, licking intermittently. Julien released him just long enough to reach behind his head and grasp his own shirt, drawing it over and off. It whispered to the floor next to their feet and suddenly Will was on him, touching, kissing this expanse of skin before him, his lips soft and his hair smelling so strongly of the mixture of scents Julien had come to know as familiar, though logically it was impossible.

Will let himself slide his fingers through the fine silvery curls of hair that wound themselves along Julien's chest between his pinkened nipples, the field tapering off the lower he felt, replaced with smooth skin stretched over the musculature Julien earned through a strict gym regimen. Julien put a hand on the back of his head and Will pressed his face into the spot where Julien's neck met his shoulder, breathing deeply, his hands still roaming, now exploring the taut back, lower until he found the supple twin rises he was looking for. Julien just held him for a few moments in a grateful embrace, before edging him up against the side of the bed. Will read his intent easily and reclined, moving backward until his head was against the cushions, Julien climbing over him until he blocked out the light. *He would live happily in shadow,* Julien's mind whispered in the moment before they touched again. Their kisses were more forceful now, growing in pressure and immediacy.

Will reversed their positions, boxing him in with his body before splaying himself out over Julien. Will's weight pressing him down on the mattress was an intimate comfort, bringing the sweet knowledge of their bodies responding to one another. Lying prone under someone else was generally not a good position for Julien to be in, considering, but he found himself letting go and giving in to Will completely, the feeling of release and trust and familiarity now wickedly intoxicating.

Will moved in waves, his kisses soft and sultry, then alternately applying more pressure that left Julien's mouth feeling crushed and sweet as overripe fruit. His hand stole up Will's half

open shirt as Will ran his touch along the side of Julien's face and then combed his fingertips through the expanse of silver hair.

Julien abandoned his mouth for his neck again and tucked Will beneath him once more, kissing the rise of his chest and pulling the shirt down as far as it would go before switching tactics, pushing the hem up to caress his midsection and kiss the trail of hair that ran southward. He paused and thumbed the buckle of Will's belt, looking up at Will again in an unspoken question. Will nodded immediately, mouth half open, his breaths begging.

"Last time, I made love to you like *he* would. I want to love you now how I would," Julien requested as he undid Will's belt and slipped him free of the rest of his clothing. "Would you let me do that?"

"Yes," Will said, after a short stretch of heavy silence.

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"Are you sure you want to do this?" Will's bodily reaction in no way matched his words of hesitation, but he hoped Julien knew he meant it.

"This is how I adapt," Julien told him, climbing off the bed to open his bag and select a few things. He handed Will an aqua-blue plug that seemed to be filled with ball bearings or beads, then held up the remote. "May I?"

Will felt himself blushing, thinking about how Hannibal once noted he colored most in his face and hands. He nodded, handing it back, but added the caveat, "I've never, uhm…"

Julien smiled at him, a hint of play despite the conversations they'd been having that evening. "I think you'll like it, but let me know if it doesn't feel good, *oui* ?"

Will nodded again.

"Just relax." Julien slipped off his trousers, but kept his briefs on. He lubricated his hand and the toy generously and touched his fingers to Will's entrance first. Will jumped, then relaxed, at the intimate contact. Julien climbed up to kiss him now, massaging around, pressing the perineum, delivering a few tantalizing strokes. Then he lifted the plug and guided it in slowly. Will clenched momentarily, then released, exhaling a small sigh as it slid into place. That hole hadn't been visited in a long time, and the sudden attention made him anxious.

"Do you want to control the speed?" Julien offered him the little remote.

"I think you know what you're doing," Will said.

"I do." Julien pressed a button, and the plug came to life, moving the beads around within it. Will gasped, a small, unconscious sound, grabbing the cheap bedspread and the pillow behind his head in a reflexive grip. The repetitive motions felt almost like a tongue, the mechanical approximate, edging around the ring of muscle and up inside.

Julien kissed his neck and ran his living tongue along the underside of Will's jawline even as he shifted beneath, breathing heavily. "How does it feel?" He murmured the question into

Will's mouth after a kiss.

"Good," Will said, squirming a bit. Julien adjusted the trajectory and increased the speed.

" *Fuck* ," Will panted.

"Too fast?"

"Yeah."

Julien ticked down the remote again and Will took several breaths. "Good?"

"Yeah," Will said through a little self-deprecating laugh. "Really good…"

"Keep talking to me." Julien put the remote on the bed next to them and slid down to wrap a hand around Will's cock and guide him into his mouth.

"Oh my *God* ," Will couldn't help saying. Well, he wasn't with Hannibal, so maybe he was allowed to say it when he felt like it.

Julien swirled his tongue, then removed his mouth to ask, "Is this okay?"

"Don't stop," Will ordered, the command coming from somewhere both forceful and desperate as he arched his neck up to look at Julien, who just smiled up at him like they were having a pleasant conversation over a coffee. "God–"

Julien put his fingers on the end of the plug and moved it slightly to add another layer of sensation. Will snared the comforter in his grip again with a staggered breath and a warning, "Now…"

It ended up being a formality, but Julien received the emission gracefully and seemed to enjoy it, though Will couldn't be sure if that was an instinct left over from his chosen career or not. He wasn't thinking very hard about it – in fact, it was hard to think about anything in the wake of the cascading pleasure, each touch of the toy and tongue knocking over dominoes until the finish. He felt fevered, liquefied, almost paralyzed with pleasure.

Julien got up and poured a little whiskey in his cup to drink, then came back to Will on the bed. He kissed him, slow, smoky-sweet with the residual Jameson. Will shut his eyes to savor the taste, still trying to get his breathing sorted out, when the plug's speed suddenly increased, making him gasp out another, " *Fuck* ."

Julien chuckled as he bent in to tease Will's nipple with the tip of his – Will had to admit – extremely talented and experienced tongue. He adjusted the toy again and moved it in a slow stroke that brought the undulations directly to the sweet spot. It was only seconds before Will came again in a different way, bringing the back of his hand against his mouth to stifle the sound he made. Not that they were the first people to have loud sex in a motel like this.

"I can't take it," he gasped out. "It's too much–"

Julien responded instantly, toning the vibrator down to the slowest rumble, then gently removing it. “How was it?” he asked, rolling to the other side of the bed to set it, and the remote, aside.

“My, uh, vocabulary’s a little limited right now,” Will said haltingly as he felt the tremors in his legs slowly recede. “Really fucking good.”

“ *Trés bien, mon coeur* ,” Julien praised him, lowering himself gently onto Will’s hips and stroking his hair as he panted. “You let me know when you’re ready for more.”

Will laughed disbelievingly. “Not sure I can take more.”

“Give it a minute,” Julien advised. He got up and brought Will his cup.

Will eased himself up on his elbow and swallowed a burning mouthful of whiskey before collapsing back on the bed again. He beckoned Julien closer and said, “Something bigger,” as he slid his hand over the silhouette Julien’s briefs could barely contain.

“I have several more I brought with me–”

Will laughed, a mixture of nerves and disbelief. “No. Just you.”

“As you wish.” Julien undressed, put on a condom and angled himself over Will again. “I’m glad you enjoyed your first foray into toyland. Watching you was very arousing.”’

“I can see that.”

“Hmm.” Julien half-smiled and took Will’s chin in his hand to kiss him, softly at first, then meeting whiskey tongue with tongue. Multi-tasking, he pressed into Will’s entrance. Will found himself very ready to receive the thick shaft. No pain or discomfort, just slick over stimulation that was uncomfortable for a few moments until it wasn’t. Julien kissed him again, then released to gather Will’s legs under his elbows, folding him up before he began to thrust. The deeper he went, the better it felt, catching new areas the toy hadn’t. Will moaned, forgetting to be quiet. Shit, Freddie Lounds could be snooping around outside.

He forgot all about that within a few seconds when Julien shifted, dropping Will’s legs to let them fold around his back, and leaned in to stroke his hair. It was his turn to grab the bedspread for support as Will rested his ankles on Julien’s backside, driving him in deeper, then to the hilt. Though the condom likely provided some desensitization, all he had to do was look directly in Julien’s eyes, and touch the side of his face, a gentle caress, and the seasoned professional lost control, something Will had always found delightful.

It made him think of Hannibal’s face, when he transitioned from collected and clinical to unbridled and totally at Will’s mercy. That image and Julien’s last efforts pushed him to the cliff again before dropping him over. Julien went rigid, shuddering, then slowly eased down for a final kiss before sliding out and dropping onto Will, head buried in the place where his shoulder met his neck.

They breathed in the dark. At last, Julien seemed to find the strength to roll off of him, though he deliberately put his arm behind Will's head and held him the way he must have known Will wanted to be held.

He drifted into a post-coital daze, in and out of consciousness, time, space, aware only of Julien's body and his own. After a time, though, he heard Lucy whimper from her crate. He eased himself up with a groan and went to the bathroom, aware that he was walking a little funny. "Can I let her out?" he asked.

"Of course." Julien was up now, in much the same state. Will let the dog out of the kennel. She went to the door and whined.

"I should take her out."

Will stepped into the shower briefly while Julien got the condom off. They traded places and Will pulled on some flannel pants and a tee-shirt before donning his coat and shoes, clipping a leash onto Lucy's collar. He was loath to step out into the wintery night, but at least the snow showers seemed to have stopped. Pulling up his hood, he walked the dog out onto the balcony, then down the stairs to the parking lot and a patch of snowy ground where she could do her business.

When he returned, Julien was stepping back into his underwear. "Stay," Will said.

Julien chuckled softly. "Was that for me or the dog?"

"Both."

They shared hesitant smiles. Will got into bed and Julien joined him, fresh-smelling from the shower. There was no hesitation, however, as Julien held him again and Will settled in, pulling the blankets up.

"You should, ah… be careful," Will advised as Julien played with his hair. "I've never told anyone about this."

"I have a strict code of confidentiality."

"I know," Will said. "What I'm saying is… we don't always know who's watching. Freddie Lounds, for example. And the Ripper, he-he might have, uh, informants, or…" He sighed, a frustrated sound. "Who knows. Things are about to get… pretty bad around here. I mean, with the Tooth Fairy case."

"So you are consulting with him," Julien confirmed, propping himself up on his elbow to look down at Will, who chose instead to take in the crumbly, textured ceiling of the motel room.

"It takes one to catch one," Will said. "I don't have time to fuck around. I've been out of this game for three years and I have to… reclaim a certain mindset if I'm gonna catch up with the Tooth Fairy before more people die."

“That means getting close to him again, doesn’t it?” Julien traced the back of his index knuckle down the side of Will’s face. Will glanced over at him and nodded. “What would he do if he knew about me?”

“I *don’t* want to find out,” Will said, enunciating each word carefully. “And trust me, neither do you. Even if he’s locked up, Julien, he’s dangerous. Please believe me when I tell you that. You need to be careful. You and-and probably Maya, too, depending on what you’ve told her.”

“She’s in Paris right now,” Julien told him. “Doing some consulting, visiting friends.”

“Go to her,” Will suggested, turning on his side and resting his forehead against Julien’s chest, curling up against him. “Stay out of Baltimore… hell, stay out of the fucking country until it’s over.”

“How will I know when it’s over?” Julien asked, nuzzling against the top of his head, inhaling his scent.

“Tooth Fairy’s dead. Or I am. Or the Ripper is. Any combination of those outcomes. And, uhm… we can’t see each other again.” Will lifted his head. “You understand? I’m not trying to… make this hard or… I’m just trying to protect you.”

“I know,” Julien said, though his voice was heavy, laden like a seeded cloud. “I know, *mon coeur* , and I’ll go. And I won’t contact you again.”

“Whatever I… left in you, you have to cut that part out. Whatever it takes.” Will burrowed against him again, and Julien held him until he slept.

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The fourth time Maya called, making his phone vibrate on the nightstand, Lucy the dog huffed her displeasure. Julien carefully shifted Will off of him and slid out of bed to grab it. There were several missed calls and texts.

Julien pulled his clothes back on as quietly as he could under the careful watch of the dog and stepped out of the motel room, leaving the door propped just a crack with the slide latch. He buttoned up his coat and went to the end of the balcony to call Maya back.

“Where are you?” she demanded. “You saw a client last night and you didn’t text me to let me know you were okay!”

“I’m sorry, *mon coeur* , I typed it in and forgot to hit send,” he lied. “There it goes.” He typed in his message and texted it to her. “I’m sorry you worried. I should have checked to make sure it went through.”

She sighed. “No, I’m sorry – fuck, what time is it there?”

“Around 5am.”

“Oh shit, baby, I’m sorry,” she said. “You just… scared me is all. I don’t know why, but I woke up this morning all agitated and shit, and not even *pain au chocolat* could make me smile.”

“Must be serious. Are you feeling well? Maybe just jet lagged?”

“Yeah, maybe. Serena and Jacques wanted to go out last night, and we ended up at a jazz club until pretty late.” She sighed again into the phone, crackling against his ear. “How was it with the senator? Everything go okay?”

“Very well. He was far less… *comportement aggressif* … apparently he learned his lesson.”

“Good, good. Okay, baby, I’m sorry again I called so many times.”

“I’m coming to Paris,” Julien told her. “Might leave today, even.”

“Really?” Her surprise was bright. “Okay, great. Let me know when you land.”

“Goodbye, darling.” They hung up.

As Julien let himself back into the room, he saw the bed mussed but empty, the sheets and comforter rumpled. Will was at the sink in the bathroom, staring at himself in the mirror, soaked in sweat, breathing heavily.

“Will?” Julien shut and locked the door, tossing his phone on the bed. “Will, what’s wrong?”

Will didn’t answer, just stared at his reflection as if he didn’t recognize himself.

“Will. Will!” Panicked, Julien took him by the shoulders and spun him into a hold, shaking him.

Will’s eyes cleared and focused. He gripped Julien around the waist, panting, then buried his head against Julien’s shoulder, holding him tightly. He was shaking all over.

“Are you all right?”

Will pulled away and turned to the mirror as if checking for something, then turned back to him. “Y-yeah. Yeah uh… I had a nightmare.”

“Not surprising, given your line of work.”

“Right.” Will pulled a plastic cup from the stack by the sink and filled it with water, taking a long drink. “Are you, uh, headed out? What time is it?”

“Little after five. I had to call my wife and I didn’t want to wake you — are you sure you’re all right?”

“I don’t know,” Will murmured, rubbing his face with both hands. “I don’t know.”

Julien pulled him into an embrace, and Will clung to him for a long time.

...and CUT!

In the next scene, Jack visits Hannibal at the BSH. Hannibal accuses Jack of using Will as bait for the Tooth Fairy.

"Bella used to say your face was all scars if you knew how to look."

"Always room for a few more."

"How much room does Will have, Jack?"

...stay tuned!

Season 3 Episode 10: And the Woman Clothed In Sun...

Chapter Summary

Hannibal gets a letter from Bedelia. The truth hurts! He thinks about what it would have been like if he'd taken Will to Florence, or on a holiday in Venice. Will falls asleep and finds himself in the memory palace, where the boundaries of time, space, and imagination are flimsy at best.

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “All Mine” – Portishead

“All the stars may shine bright
All the clouds may be white
But when you smile
Ohh how I feel so good
That I can hardly wait
To hold you
Enfold you
Never enough
Render your heart to me
All mine...
You have to be
From that cloud, number nine
Danger starts the sharp incline
And such sad regrets
Ohh as those starry skies
As they swiftly fall
Make no mistake
You shan't escape
Tethered and tied
There's nowhere to hide from me
All mine...
You have to be
Don't resist
We shall exist
Until the day I die
Until the day I die
All mine...
You have to be”

It is a Herculean effort to keep myself in check when Will is on the other side of the glass.

I cannot let him know the effect his presence has on me, that I crave the smell of him coming in through the air holes in my cage. Air holes, like a child punching through the top of a jar lid in order to keep fireflies alive. I am a specimen, torn out of my natural habitat and I blink here, flashing my colors in vain for the amusement of Chilton, of Alana, and of Will and the FBI.

Will's abilities have a hint of the supernatural. I cannot emote anything I do not want him to sense. I lock myself down like the ward at night, so intent on my obfuscation that sometimes I only half-hear what he is saying.

Sometimes, however, the anger gets through. The pettiness, the lasting echo of my pain, a wound just as scarring as the one on his forehead. He cut me open again that day in Wolf Trap when he made love to me and then told me to leave, banishing me from his mind and his presence.

"I like this Dragon, Will," I say, before I can stop myself. But it feels wonderful, especially when I see the sour look on his face, the way he juts his chin forward just a few degrees. Jealous. "I don't think he's crazy at all. I think he might be quite sane. A magnificent thing, to watch the world through his red haze."

Will scoffs, but I know I've struck a nerve. "Having spent some time in that red haze, I'll pass."

"Suit yourself," I say, and turn away, signaling the end of our interview. I force myself not to look back as he turns to leave. When I can only see his body, not his face, I tend to forget how deeply I want to punish him for what he's done. Especially his backside.

It is very quiet when Will has gone. I pick up my book and try to read, but I am only staring at the pages and thinking of him. It infuriates me to consider he could so easily purge me out of his thoughts for three years. Yet, I don't believe he was wholly successful. He believes he was. But I know he thought of me. I could feel it. And I know he dreamed of me. I was there. Our memory palaces have some real estate in common.

Denise comes in with her little cart, a box full of my mail sitting on top of it. "Good evening, Denise," I greet her, getting up to stand behind my table, hands behind my back.

"Mail call, Dr. Lecter." She opens the drawer that passes through the glass and lifts out a pile of envelopes, then sends them through.

"Thank you. Have a pleasant rest of your shift."

She doesn't answer me. She never does. Still, courtesy is my second nature. Once she is back through the door and the lock is engaged, I collect my haul.

All of the envelopes have been opened, the letters copied and hoarded by Chilton and Alana to study. Most are requests for interviews. One is from a conspiracy theorist that is convinced

I am not the Chesapeake Ripper and is trying to prove my innocence. He thinks I was a patsy for the FBI. I have been playing with him. It is amusing each time a letter comes, for about five minutes. One must collect amusement when one can. The mental gymnastics he's willing to do are Olympic-level.

There is, however, one letter still sealed within a security envelope. The return address is the law firm of Hamlin, Metcalf, & McGill. If my correspondence is from my lawyer, Chilton and Alana are not allowed to open it.

I bring my pile of letters casually over to the bed, where I sit to read them, saving the unopened one for last. I hope it is from the Dragon. Perhaps he sent me a bite. I'm starving.

I tear open the letter and shake out a few pages of thin paper, nearly translucent. The missive is written in a strange blue-purple ink I can't place. I do, however, recognize the penmanship. Bedelia. How delightful. And unexpected.

Dear Hannibal,

Please forgive me for electing not to respond to your various greeting cards over these last three years. I felt it was important to distance myself from you. I am only writing now because I feel compelled. I have made a breakthrough in your therapy that, as your doctor, I could not keep to myself. You once agreed to help me tell the story I wanted to tell about our time together, and thus far, you have kept your promise, as I knew you would. I request that you destroy this letter after reading it; it is written on edible paper with an ink made of vegetable and fruit juices. I know how careful you are about what you put in your body.

I have had a visit from Will Graham. He came to one of my lectures in Baltimore, and made an appointment to see me. If he hasn't come to you yet, I'm sure he will. It is only a matter of time before the two of you are back in each other's orbit, a cosmic gravity that cannot be denied.

Mr. Graham is angry with me for emerging unscarred from my time behind the veil with you, when he is full of scars. It might amuse you to be aware of his jealousy for the time we were together in Florence. It is safe to say he actively resents me for taking his place at your side, though the choice was his own.

It was during this exchange where I had my breakthrough regarding your therapy. I asked Mr. Graham to imagine he saw a wounded bird on the ground, and tell me the first thing that came to his mind.

"It's vulnerable," he said. "I want to help it."

I realized that he and I differ in our responses. Whereas I could easily see Will Graham gathering the bird into his hands and taking it home to care for it, patiently feeding it with an eye-dropper and making a tiny splint for its wing, I believe we both know what I would do.

I would crush it. A primal rejection of weakness which is every bit as natural as the nurturing instinct.

I have no nurturing instinct. You know this. I have to thank you for never treating me like a monster because of it. Society views women who do not want children as defective. I had to see six doctors before I could find one to perform a tubal ligation. The others refused, citing my future husband – a person that I hadn't met yet, that theoretically would never exist – might want children.

Will Graham, on the other hand, has the nurturing instinct. It is a deep-seated, core part of who he is. We have seen it expressed in him again and again, from his love for Abigail to the dogs he rescues.

Yet, you have convinced Will he is a killer. Our sense of self, everything we see, everything we remember, is nothing more than a construct of the mind. Will's empathy disorder allowed you to alter his construct, to mold him into what you wanted. But in order for the transformation to be complete, Will himself needs to believe that he has no more morality or goodness than you possess. Or I possess.

Will and I have both been your brides. Long have I wondered why I could not be for you what Will Graham has the potential to be. It has been a sore spot. I have had to examine my motivations and desires. I feel an affinity for you because you do not tolerate weakness. You celebrate and revere strength. I can't blame you for doing what evolution has equipped you to do. As your therapist, I have always wanted to help illuminate the parts of yourself that stubbornly remain in shadow.

Evolution, however, also compels us to mate, to seek the company of others where we feel seen, accepted, loved. It is part of the fabric of human existence. It is not just companionship behind the veil you seek, Hannibal – you could have had that with me easily enough, but you chose instead to feed me acorns, oysters, and marsala. It is love, in the deepest, most human sense of the word, that you have been hunting as diligently as any prey.

You want Will Graham because of his capacity to nurture. You need love, Hannibal. You want to be nurtured and cared for, and nurture and care for in return. In order to win Will's love, you had to convince him he's just like you, when in fact he is merely capable of righteous violence because of his instinct towards compassion. How else could you trick him into loving you? Make him think he deserves you. That you deserve each other.

It's really quite banal when held up for analysis. You're still the little orphan boy with a dead sister you couldn't protect. Will Graham is still the dirt poor social outcast whose mother abandoned him. The two of you grew up, and now you have guns and knives and sexual needs, but the core of who you are is exactly the same as it's always been. The same as it ever was.

How is one murderer worthy of compassion and not another? You and Will Graham have constructed your reasons. I believe it boils down to the ability to love and be loved in return. You are capable of love, Hannibal. Real love, not just fondness or amusement. You likely do not believe me at this moment, but you will see that it's true. The two of you have framed it like a fairytale. The prince turned into a beast can be made human again, if only he can find

someone to love him in his monstrous form. You are working for your miracle. You want the spell to be broken, the kingdom saved. Happily ever after.

Despite all of this, please do not forget how many times Will Graham has broken your heart. Has rejected you. How many times will you let him? I always admired your ability to crush weakness. This time, Hannibal, you are the weak one, if you let him live. This time, he may summon the strength to crush you.

Dr. Bedelia Du Maurier

Even as my mind reels from Bedelia's revelations, I tear up her letter and eat it. I can taste the blueberries in the ink. As far as paper goes, it's quite palatable.

I resist her assessment at first, purely out of spite.

Then, as usual, I realize that her analysis of me is shockingly astute. Her analysis of Will even more so. What she does not know is that I have already had part of this revelation.

I love Will. I am *in love* with him. I just didn't know why, not exactly, until now.

And though Bedelia's therapy has always been spectacularly enlightening, her assertion that Will and I are nothing more than projections of our childhood traumas irritates me to the point where I am more sure than ever that I'm going to eat her. Her other sin is presumption, that her lack of a nurturing instinct is the only reason why I can't love her the same way I do Will. It might be the principal reason, but not the only. She gives herself very high marks she has not, in my opinion, fairly earned.

Her jealousy is also so evident it borders on rude.

After eating Bedelia's words, I put the rest of my correspondence in order. I have very little time until lights out. I spend it working on my current drawing, Alana as Botticelli's Venus. I've only drawn it to annoy her. I should send it to Margot.

When the lights go out, I stretch out on my cot and stretch out my mind as well. I think about the night Bedelia and I left Baltimore, and spin out a fantasy where it was Will instead. I think of his lips curling around the delicate edge of a champagne glass on our flight, his first time in first class. Sharing the flat with him instead, Will soaking in the brass bathtub, letting me wash his hair. I let myself sink deeper into the illusion; what would it have been like to waltz with him instead of Bedelia? What would Sogliato have said then?

I think of Will stabbing him in the temple with the ice pick. *That might have been impulsive,* he says with a coquettish smile. *I'm sorry, sweetheart, I didn't like the way he talked to you.* I would pretend to be exasperated, and we would dismember him together, enjoy his liver together.

We would go on holiday. I would take Will to Venice. Traveling everywhere by boat would delight him. As I drift off, I imagine where he must be tonight — some cheap accommodations the FBI has provided. No doubt he is in bed himself, perhaps too agitated to sleep after his appointment with Bedelia. Her powers of observation are infuriating, mostly because she is so often right.

Will in Venice…

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…and Will again found himself in the Norman Chapel. It was empty, and vastly silent, the only sound the sputtering of prayer candles as they slowly winked out one at a time. Prayers answered or denied or ignored by apathetic dieties.

Will walked slowly up the aisle and raised his eyes, expecting to see the mosaic of Jesus Pantocrator staring down at him in tiled disapproval, constricting him like the saints and apostles did with their flat eyes and inhuman visages. Instead, the chapel had no roof. Beyond was an expanse of starry sky, a cosmic tear.

"Hannibal?" Will called. This was the memory palace. It was also a dream, and Will was aware enough this time to understand it, though he still felt like he was in the backseat of his own mind, unable to change what was happening but positioned to see out the windshield.

"Hannibal?" he tried again. There was no answer. Will descended the stairs tucked in the corner of the chapel and found the door to the crypt open. This was the place where Will had told Hannibal he forgave him. Will himself still wasn't sure if that had been a lie or not. At the time, he was so desperate to find Hannibal he didn't know what he was actually going to do with him when he did. Dog chasing a car.

Except the doors did not open into a subterranean tunnel. Instead, Will stepped onto the deck of a large boat. The chapel bled away behind him, dissolving into smoke as the scene and his understanding of it changed. Dream logic.

Will felt underdressed as he stepped off the water taxi. All of Venice was decked out for Carnivale, people walking around in huge costumes, some historical, some more modern, terrifying, really. Everywhere the black, soulless eyes of masks, unmoving lips. The bars and restaurants were packed with tourists and revelers. Will wore black, his only real adornment a vest that had some interesting ribbing in it that contoured to his midsection, and laced up the back. His mask only covered half his face, dull gold, demure in design.

He found the place he was looking for — a luxury palazzo that seemed to contain the façade of Hannibal's house in Baltimore as well, the front doors identical. It was alive with humans and music from a string quartet. Bach, Goldberg Variations. The space seemed to be an expanded version of Hannibal's foyer and living room, cleared out for entertaining, food heaped everywhere and caterers weaving through the crowd with trays.

The fact that the hors d'oeuvres contained human flesh seemed to be not only known, but celebrated, the tables decorated with skulls, bones, and flowers. The centerpiece of the largest table appeared to be a blood fountain where guests were dipping pieces of cut fruit or fancy cheeses. Will was repulsed, yet fascinated, as a woman lifted a piece of watermelon with a "prosciutto" rose atop it and stuffed it greedily into her mouth. She turned to her friend and said, "I think the guy was a real ham." They laughed uproariously.

Hannibal was here. Will could feel that dark, cool, slithery presence, and it excited him as much as it always unnerved him as well.

There were signs on little placards placed in a few different areas — near the drinks, food. "No names. No personal information. Masks stay on until midnight."

He found some wine and settled on a sofa in the corner, a little out of the way. Conversations wafted to him, mostly about pop culture, politics, Carnivales past. Nothing personal. No get-to-know-you questions. Will scanned the growing crowd, trying to guess which man was Hannibal. He had to be one of the masked men who had their entire faces and heads covered. There were several in cloaks of varying colors, their faces hidden entirely, some even gloved as well. Female presenting guests opted for party dresses and half-masks with wigs.

Inevitably, people trickled his way and joined him on the sofa and nearby chairs, striking up conversations with him and each other. Everyone was suspiciously attractive, based on what was able to be seen. Will was still in awe of this gathering in the memory-melded-with-dream palace, at what the rules of the construct were, but some of the details were taking shape. Invitation only, or there was some sort of screening process that one had to pass through, a requirement being a certain level of conventional attractiveness. Or money, probably.

One of the men in the group caught his attention, though he was definitely not Hannibal – Will could see his brown hair since he only wore a domino mask. The mask was in a harlequin pattern, black and red, and the colors and pattern were echoed in his cummerbund and pocket square. He looked familiar, but Will couldn't place him – young, late twenties or early thirties, about his height, gray eyes, distinctive ear shape.

He noticed Will noticing him, and his mouth quirked a smile. He looked directly at Will as he turned to leave, and raised a finger in a beckoning motion before slipping through a curtain on the other side of the room.

Will did one more sweep of the room for Hannibal. He had it narrowed down to a few possibilities based on height and build. There was a man in a black suit with an intricate gold and silver brocade vest beneath a long black cloak that swept the floor. His mask covered his entire face and trailed black fabric that joined with the cloak. Another was dressed like a medieval king, all in white and gold, with a thick fur cloak and a mask that went up into a crown perched on what was definitely a blonde shoulder-length wig. Last possibility was a gentleman death, complete with full-face skull mask, a hood pulled up.

Could be any of them. Could be none of them.

Will got up and followed the man behind the curtain.

The salon within was a strange sight, the room cut into parts by heavy velvet curtains of blue and gold. The man was waiting for him in one of the partitioned areas, seated on a wide, intricately carved fainting couch.

The stranger invited Will to sit next to him, so he did, and was startled by his immediate touch, running a greedy palm behind his head and down his neck, the other creeping up his thigh.

"I'm glad you followed me," he said, voice low, American accent. "Y'know, it was no small thing, almost killing the Chesapeake Ripper. I almost had him for you."

"W-what?" Will stammered.

"Eh, water under the bridge I guess." The harlequin traced his fingers down Will's cheek.

Will sensed, more than saw, a shadow passing by the half-closed curtain. "What if I'm here with someone?" he asked.

He laughed. "Nobody is here with anyone."

It's that kind of party, then. And Hannibal had deliberately lured him here? Was it some kind of test?

"Remember, you have to keep your mask on," the man said, voice lilting playfully as he gently eased closer as if to kiss him.

"Wait–" Will managed to get that word out, at least before the man pressed their lips together. Will immediately pulled back and tried to get up from the couch, but someone had their hand around his wrist, having slipped onto the cushion next to him without him even noticing. It was a woman in a black dress, with long dark hair, wearing a half-mask that looked like the black stag's head, antlers rising up toward the ceiling. Without warning, she leaned in and kissed him next.

She tasted good, familiar, almost, like he was coming home to somewhere he hadn't been in a long time. Her obvious pleasure aroused him, but he tried to ignore it. Still, it was a long moment before he pulled away. "Let go," he said.

She did, with a frustrated little sigh. "I only ever wanted what was best for you, Will."

He got up and went back out to the main room, sweating under his mask. He snagged a glass of wine from a passing tray and gulped it down. It had a faint coppery taste, and he was suddenly sure there had been blood mixed with it.

More wine. He was approached several more times as he waited, still looking for Hannibal. Finally, in an attempt to prevent any more solicitations, he sat down with a man who had just arrived, perched on a tall chair at a table in an unobtrusive corner. He was dressed in a Napoleon-style red velvet jacket, his half mask topped with twisted horns. If he was going to pass the time, it might as well be with the devil.

Handsome devil, he had to admit. The gentleman was older, but slim in the waist and muscular in the shoulders, with gray-streaked hair, though his angular features were still youthful. Brown eyes, and nice skin, if Will was looking, which he wasn't. Was he? Why does he seem so familiar?

"Bon soir," the devil greeted as Will slid into an adjacent seat after snagging a drink from a passing tray.

"Evening."

The devil smiled, just a ghost of a lip curve. "My apologies. I thought you were French."

"I'll take that as a compliment, though I'm sorry to uh… disappoint. W-What brings you to Venice? I mean, I think this might be Venice… I came here on a boat…"

The devil nodded his head. "It is. And I'm working. I have several clients in attendance tonight."

Will shifted closer, panic rising in his chest. "Julien?" he hissed.

The devil said, "You're good at guessing. Didn't you read the signs?"

Will glanced around the party, then back at his demonic companion. "Julien, listen, you have to get out of here," he whispered, his words edged with fear. "He's here. The Ripper's here, and-and it's not safe."

Julien's eyes flashed behind the mask. "Doesn't like the idea of us being together? Maybe he shouldn't have gutted you."

"Julien, please. You have to go."

"When I'm finally myself in the dream?" Julien chuckled and shook his head. "I don't think so." He slid his hand over Will's thigh.

Will removed it for him. "I don't know if this is some kind of test of fidelity or if he's… just curious. He wants to see what I'll do."

"What are you going to do?" The question was mild, banal, almost, but Will could sense the undercurrent. "You've already been with me. Who else?"

"Molly," Will said. "Molly's in danger, too."

"Any others? Or are their pieces off the chessboard?"

Alana? Margot? Matthew Brown?

"Listen to me," Will said, taking Julien forcefully by the arm. "When I was in prison, he thought – thought, mind you – that I might have promised an orderly that I would have sex with him if he killed Hannibal for me. I never touched the guy. Not once. I might have… I don't know, made eyes at him, maybe let him think – but I never even promised anything. But

it made him so furious…" Will blushed, remembering how Hannibal had held him down and dominated him in a jealousy-fuelled passion.

"Let me tell you what I think. From a professional standpoint. He wants you to stray. Because the sex afterward is… fucking mind blowing." Julien smiled knowingly. "He reclaims ownership, does he?"

"I… uh…" Will shook his head, sweat dampening the back of his neck.

"I think you've found your answer," the devil said, "as to why he's brought you here tonight. You're playing your role very well. I'm sure he'll play his. You're being hunted. You're willing prey, and you've accepted that."

Will took a breath. Nodded.

"I've had clients describe a similar experience," Julien told him, signaling for drink. "One was a rope enthusiast, very interested in artistic bondage, a style called shibari. She found it erotic, of course, but the act of being tied and having her agency stripped away was extremely meditative for her. An exercise in patience, presence. Letting go."

Will did a double take. He could just make out the dark outline of a figure standing in a doorway that led into another curtained salon, unmoving. Watching them?

"You're using me again," Julien said, with a touch of sadness. "You used me to try and be close to him when he was far away, and then you used me because you felt guilty that you did something to my mind. Infected me, like you said. Now you're using me to infuriate him."

"I told you to leave," Will argued.

"Then why are you still touching me?"

Will pulled his hand back from Julien's arm like he'd been burned.

"What will he do to you?" The question was a raw whisper.

"I… uh, I don't–"

"Is he rough with you?"

"Yes," Will told him — it was the truth, after all. "Not always. But… he'll want to… make himself known."

The devil's breath caught, the slightest hitch. Julien's eyes had gone dark, and Will could sense his arousal. "Does he — hurt you?"

"Yes. In the way he knows I want him to," Will admitted, feeling stirrings of his own at the thought. "Looking at, uhm… the marks later…" He shook his head suddenly, trying to clear it. "I'm not – you can't be here. You have to go before he eats you."

Julien nodded. He reached over and squeezed Will's hand. "I wish we'd never crossed paths," he said.

"I'm sorry." Will picked up a nearby cup of wine and had just drained his glass when the sound of an ominous bell struck twelve times. At last. Midnight.

Julien reached over to touch Will's mask.

Very suddenly, there was a hand on Will's arm and the back of his neck, encased in velvet gloves. Will turned away from the devil's hand and looked up into the dark, glittering eyes of the gentleman death, who took him by the hand and guided him out of the chair to the center of the large hall where the lights had brightened and the partygoers gathered to see who it was they'd been flirting with or fucking that night. Masks were flying in the air amid drunken laughter that echoed through the marble halls.

Death took him by the small of his back and pulled him close enough that the vast swath of velvet black cloak brushed him, making him shiver involuntarily. Will reached up to touch the edge of the cowl at the base of the mask in an attempt to raise it, but Death caught his hand in a painfully tight grip that brought a gasp to his lips. Death lifted Will's mask instead, dropping it to the floor, and pausing for a moment as if studying him for the first time. Then the black-clad hand traced the line of his cheek, moving to brush his hair back across his forehead.

Will tried again to lift Death's mask, and this time he was allowed. Easing the cowl up and removing the mask and hood, he was confronted with Hannibal's cold, princely countenance, even more otherworldly and disturbing, perhaps, without the mask, the black velvet costume such a contrast to his skin, enhancing the silvery-brown hair and the sharpness of his eyes and features.

But Hannibal wasn't looking at him. Will glanced over his shoulder and saw Julien watching them. Smiling sadly, he raised his glass, then drained it.

Hannibal turned his gaze back to Will and caressed his face with the black velvet glove again, drawing them closer together before gripping him by the jaw and demanding his kiss, other hand locked around one of Will's wrists as if he might try to pull away, despite the fact that Will was pressed up against him of his own free will, fingers wrapped around a swath of cloak.

"Come," was the singular order, and Hannibal let him go, headed for the opposite side of the hall where two staircases twisted skyward and met on the second floor, crowned with a nightmarishly large version of the antelope head from the house in Baltimore. Will followed him, weaving through the crowd, passing so many familiar faces now unmasked – Matthew Brown, Alana, Margot, Zeller, Jimmy, Chilton, Jack, Bella, all of them drinking, talking, laughing, enjoying themselves. And knowingly eating human flesh.

Hannibal led him up the stairs to a long hall of closed doors, then another spiral staircase that deposited them on the highest floor. As they ascended, Will's concerns seemed to peel away one layer at a time. This was the memory palace. This was a dream. Anything was possible, and if that was the case, then Will knew instinctively what he wanted.

Hannibal took a large, intricate iron key from somewhere on his person and unlocked the door to reveal his bedroom at the house in Baltimore, but redecorated to represent the height of Venetian decadence. Double glass doors led to a small terrace, and Will could see fireworks across the canals. He went to the terrace door and kicked off his footwear, glad to be rid of it.

He smiled when he heard Hannibal lock the door behind them, and slide the bolt. Turning from the view of Venice, he saw not Hannibal but Death coming toward him now, mask back on, hood up.

"Isn't that against Carnivale rules?" Will asked him, a coy tilt of his head. "Re-masking?"

Hannibal loomed over him now, seeming taller in the costume. Will thought fleetingly of concepts all the way back from Psych 101 — how differently would Hannibal act behind a mask, though he was in no way anonymous? Would he be more himself in this costume than in his person suit? A little thrill of delighted fear echoed through him.

Death slid a gloved hand along Will's face slowly before tracing the velvet fingers over his throat, then closing a grip on his shoulder. With a sudden twist, he had Will pinned against the terrace doors, facing the view, his cheek against the glass, the door handles biting into his hips. "Put your hands on the glass." Death's command was somehow even more emotionless than Hannibal's usual cadence, almost feral calm.

Will did as he was told, raising his hands to shoulder height and spreading them into the cool glass of the doors. He could see gondolas filled with lights on the canals below and watched them, though his mind and body were tense and waiting for what came next. There was a soft snick, which at first he could not identify, until a cold edge of metal touched his throat. A folding knife, like the one he'd pulled on Hannibal after they'd left the Uffizi Gallery. Will's mind was blank save the sensation of the blade's edge traveling ever so lightly along the flesh of his neck, around the side and to the back. He felt his breathing intensify.

The blade left his skin, but there was pressure on the back of his neck, then a small rending sound. The sensation repeated itself and Will risked a look over his shoulder. Death was cutting his vest off of him, one lace at a time, in an achingly slow descent from his neck down to the base of his back. The anticipation built as his midsection was slowly freed. Death helped him slide his arms out and tossed the ruined garment to the floor, leaving Will in his black dress shirt and trousers.

He tried to turn, but Death put a hand on the back of his head and pressed his face into the window again. Will's breath distorted the glass and he put his hands back where they were. The pressure on his head released, but he stayed put, listening for sounds of Death over the echoes of revelry that came through the doors, filtering up from below.

"Look at me," came the order.

Will slowly removed himself from his place against the glass and turned. Death was seated in a chair not far from the bed, the knife unfolded, sitting bare on a table at his side.

"Remove your clothing," was the next command.

Will tried to temper his excitement, to play his part in the game as well. He unbuttoned one cuff, then the other, before slowly opening the rest of his shirt. Waiting an anticipatory moment, he finally opened it and let it slide off of his shoulders. If Death was enjoying the show, he made no indication. Will stepped out of his pants and made as if to remove his tight black undergarment.

"Enough."

He let his hands fall back to his sides, feeling simultaneously exposed and bold.

"Get on your knees."

Will knelt. It wasn't uncomfortable — the plush carpet saw to that. He squared his shoulders and lifted his chin, resting his hands on his thighs, sitting back on his heels.

"She was to your liking?"

Will had almost forgotten about the woman he'd kissed. "Yes," he admitted. "She was our type. Alana."

"Something I can forgive." Hannibal's eyes glittered behind the mask. "But why him? Your handsome devil?"

Will ran his tongue over his lower lip as a thread of desire tugged at him, twitching dangerously through different parts of his body. "You know why."

"I understand the motivation. I heard the conversation. I know you know why I brought you here," Death said with infuriating patience. "I want to hear you say it. You will say it. You will tell me why specifically. Why him."

"I wanted you. The first time, all I wanted was you. But you were gone, and – I was weak. I wanted him to be you so badly that I broke something in him. The second time was recompense for that."

"You had power over him," Death supplied, leaning one elbow on the arm of the chair.

"I guess I did," Will admitted.

"You have power over me. You realize that." It was a statement, not a question. "In much the same way."

Will nodded.

"It infuriates me." These three words sounded more like Hannibal.

"Why?" An ice cube of fear slid across the back of his neck. Was this still a game?

"My love for you defies reason. I have come to the point where I can admit it to myself. I know why it exists. But your power over me provides a continual frustration."

“I’m very good at relieving frustration.” He couldn’t help but say it with a little smile.

“You are. And so the pattern continues.”

Will wasn’t sure what to say, so he kept his mouth shut.

“Come here.” Will moved to stand, but Death stopped him with, “On your knees.”

Will did as he was told, crawling along the carpet until he was at Hannibal’s feet, his bare knees touching the folds of his black cloak. He took a chance and slid his hands up to Hannibal’s legs, along his thighs, trying to slip between them. Hannibal resisted a moment, then allowed it.

Will reached for his belt, a complex thing with three buckles, but Death caught his hand and wrist in his own crushing velvet grip. “You strayed,” he said. “Again.”

“You tried to eat my brain,” Will countered.

“This is your chance to beg for my forgiveness.” Death released his hand and cupped Will’s face with one of his own, drawing the encased fingers behind his head, then thumbing his bottom lip before catching him by the chin.

Will pulled away in an easy motion. “You were with Bedelia.”

“I know. I’m aware of my hypocrisy.”

“You knew I was going to move on with my life.” Will paused. “But part of you — maybe just a small part — hoped it wouldn’t happen.”

The velvet hand circled his throat, giving a brief, warning squeeze. “Don’t.”

Will shut his mouth again and the pressure on his throat slowly ebbed away. The black glove came back to his cheek and Will leaned into it, glad for the distraction. He moved his hands closer to where Hannibal’s legs met, letting his fingers linger there. Death allowed it, but caught his wrists when he reached for the belt again. “Get up,” he ordered.

Will stood, as did Hannibal. He watched as Death went to an antique wardrobe and opened it. Items within rattled metallically. Will watched him withdraw something black and approach. “Turn around.”

Will turned to the window again and looked out over the piazza until his vision was obstructed by a blindfold. He kept still, listening for Hannibal’s movement, but, as usual, he heard nothing, flinching in surprise when he felt Hannibal’s hands on him again. Some kind of cordage, smooth, slid across his body, winding around him several times, looping from his bicep around his pectorals and then lower, trapping his arms against his sides, though Hannibal stopped at his elbows, leaving the lower arms and hands free. The bindings continued over his stomach, down to his hips and navel, winding back and forth.

Hannibal — Death — was in front of him now. Will bent his elbows and reached out with what reach he could, brushing his fingers over the embroidered cloth of Hannibal’s costume.

“I wish it wasn’t so,” Hannibal whispered, drawing him into an embrace, the cloth of the mask against Will’s cheek and the blindfold. “But I find you beautiful this way. Something so scarred and dangerous and lovely bent at my mercy.”

Will inhaled to speak, but the gloved hand was over his mouth now, the other locked around the small of his back, guiding him to walk backward until his thighs hit the edge of the bed. Will let Hannibal recline him, position him, his breathing quickening again in the vast darkness of the blindfold.

He was alone now in the darkness. Now the sound of the cabinet opening again, and the rattle of something that sounded suspiciously like chains. Hannibal wrapped thick cuffs around his wrists, like the ones he’d had to wear when he was restrained in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, tightening them to the point of discomfort. Will stayed relaxed for his left, but when Hannibal wrapped the cuff around his right, he couldn’t help but pull back. Useless. Of course. Hannibal held him easily with one arm and used the other hand to tighten the buckles.

And then he was alone in the darkness again. Will tested his limits. The cords around his chest and stomach were tight, seemed to feel tighter the more he moved, digging into his skin, one tantalizing cord crossing a rapidly stiffening nipple. The cuffs were on chains that were attached to the edge of the bed frame, probably, allowing him a limited amount of motion, a few inches at most. He could touch his own midsection, and ran his fingers along the silky rope, medium weight, trying to feel for a knot. He managed to get his fingers between the cordage and his skin and pulled. It only constricted him elsewhere, a cord sliding off his shoulder and coming to rest at the place where his neck met it. Pulling just made everything tighter.

“Do you find this — what was it — meditative?”

“No,” Will told him, straining against the chains again.

A cold hand — skin this time — touched his forehead. It was a cool heaven. “Because you’re still fighting.” The bed shifted as Hannibal climbed on and sat on Will’s thighs, holding them down as well. Will drew his breath in sharply as he felt the expanse of flesh on him. Hannibal was naked against him now, stretching his body over Will’s, further restricting his movement. Will tested the length of the restraints, and they were just long enough to let him brush his fingers over Hannibal’s bare thighs. He strained to touch more but was denied.

“Let go,” Hannibal advised, breath sliding over Will’s lips. Will tried to kiss him, but only found the air, then a hand in his hair holding his head down against the mattress.

“Hannibal,” Will begged, moving his body beneath the expanse of his in a desperate grind.

“Not until you let go,” Hannibal said, words against his neck as puffs of air, nothing more. “Accept this. And everything that comes after.”

Will forced his body to relax in increments, which was absolute torture, worse than the cuffs cutting off his circulation or the ropes digging into his skin. Breathing deeply, he tried to focus on nothing but the blackness of the blindfold before him.

“Good,” Hannibal encouraged, the hand in his hair caressing now. Lips on his, a gentle brush. Will forced himself to keep his head against the bed instead of angling his neck to bury his mouth against Hannibal’s. “Good,” Hannibal repeated, moving his lips away from Will’s and down his throat with increasing pressure, until Will felt him testing the flesh with his teeth.

Maddeningly, he stopped, the teeth slipping away from the moistened flesh. “Haven’t I always given you what you want, Will? Haven’t I given you anything you’ve ever desired? Things, even, that you didn’t know you wanted until I gave them to you?”

“Yes,” Will confessed.

“Now you will beg,” Hannibal whispered against the side of his face, words slithering into his ear.

His lips came down again to the place, but merely kissed, gently, before moving away again, finding a new place, a clear swath of skin below the collarbone but above the twist of rope. Another chaste kiss, then the tiniest flick of the tongue and a pointed tooth dimpling the flesh so very delicately.

It was maddening. Will lost the calm he’d captured through accepting the restraints, and strained against them again. “Hannibal…”

Cool breath just beneath his nipple now, at the curve of his ribs. Again, the frustrating kisses, and the lightest brush of the teeth. Will arched against him, but Hannibal merely pushed himself up and created space between them. “Is it so difficult for you?” Hannibal touched him through his undergarment, again so infuriatingly gentle.

Will gasped, and gave in. “Please. Do it.”

“Do what?” Hannibal’s voice was deep, reverberating in his ears almost like an echo.

“Mark me.” He felt pain now, a burning sensation, but it wasn’t Hannibal —it was his pride.

Without warning, the bite came, at his throat. He gasped out Hannibal’s name, felt the lips around the wound form a smile. Hannibal teased Will with two fingers, running them unmercifully over his outline from base to tip.

Hannibal kissed him, and he tasted the salty-sweet iron of his own blood. He tore Will’s last piece of clothing free of his body. “Now,” Hannibal said softly, “beg me for the rest.”

“Fuck me,” Will demanded immediately, no hesitation. “Please, Hannibal— no, don’t…” he protested as Hannibal slid off of him and the bed. “Damn,” he cursed, straining against his bonds again in frustration.

“A moment. Patience.” Hannibal came back to him, hand slick with lube. He slipped a finger in and Will shuddered, tensing, straining against the ropes and cuffs again. “Accept it. Let go,” Hannibal ordered him.

Will tried to slow his breathing. When Hannibal slid a finger into him again, he forced himself to find the meditative place of trust he'd touched before. Hannibal found the sweet spot, but he concentrated on remaining still and simply feeling the sensation, putting up no resistance. Hannibal added another finger, and his pleasure swelled further.

Hannibal kissed him tenderly. "Very good," he murmured against the side of Will's face. "You've earned a reward." Hannibal slipped the blindfold from his eyes with cool fingers.

"Will you let me go?" he heard himself asking, voice trembling a bit as Hannibal continued to finger him.

"Why would I do that?" Hannibal removed his fingers and teased at Will's opening with the head.

"Because I want to touch you."

"Not yet. Earn it, Will."

Will forced himself into total submission again, and Hannibal was able to enter to the hilt in one push. Will inhaled sharply and exhaled a moan, and was surprised and pleased to hear Hannibal do much the same, his veneer of control suddenly chipping away.

Will's legs were free, at least, so he was able to telegraph his desire by circling them around Hannibal's back, resting his heels against the rise of his backside, moving with him as he began his thrusts. Hannibal kissed him, recklessly now, before burying his face in Will's neck. Will arched his head back, mouth open to gasp his breath as the strokes became more insistent, filling him with aching, beautiful force.

"Do you think," Hannibal breathed between thrusts, "that your hired lover could do this to you? That it would feel the way it feels with me?"

"No." The word was contorted with a sudden pain as Hannibal dragged his teeth over the thin flesh covering his collarbone.

"Do you think anyone could?"

"No," Will moaned the word as Hannibal's movements caught his inner pleasure center just right.

Hannibal pulled out suddenly. There was a momentary emptiness before he rammed back in, causing Will to utter a strangled curse of agony and adoration. Hannibal gazed down at him, hips still moving though not as aggressively, a look of unchecked adoration on his face. He thumbed Will's bottom lip a moment, then bent to kiss him again, softer this time.

Hannibal used one arm to support himself as he continued his thrusts, but the other worked expertly against the buckle of the wrist restraints, freeing one hand, then the other.

Will was at last able to at least put grateful hands on Hannibal's chest and midsection. Hannibal quivered at his touch for a tender moment before repeating his previous trick, thrusting so deep Will thought he might split, the pain and pleasure and fullness working

together to make his vision feather black at the edges. Without warning he came, hard, and again a few moments later when Hannibal stroked him from the front, a different climax entirely.

When he returned to himself, Hannibal was looking down at him, clearly pleased with himself, but still unspent.

"I have one more thing to ask you for," Will panted as Hannibal ran a hand through his damp hair, tugging gently, then with more force as his thrusts became more insistent.

"What is it, Will?" came Hannibal's breathy answer.

"Tell me you love me."

Hannibal locked eyes with him and climaxed in a sudden seizing of his entire frame. He collapsed on Will, the ropes still between them, Will's skin rubbed raw in several places and crying out for relief. Hannibal put his lips against Will's neck, then said the words. A few moments later, propped up and looking into Will's eyes again, he repeated them…

… I love you.

The alarm on Will's phone went off just as Hannibal's declaration faded across the expanse of time and space that separated them.

Will put his hand on himself, and with a mere brush of his fingers, he spilled, pressing his mouth into the pillow to silence the sound.

" *Fuck* ," he cursed, slapping the phone with his clean hand until it stopped beeping.

It had happened again. A dream that wasn't a dream, that was in a malleable version of the memory palace, where he was aware he was dreaming but not consistently, and Hannibal seemed to be the one shaping their reality.

Hannibal wasn't just a fly buzzing in the back of his head. He was a dark swarm of rampant insects descending on Will's mind like a biblical plague.

Biblical. The Mark of the Beast is 666.

The Great Red Dragon.

He had to get to New York. Had to see the Blake painting. Had to understand the Dragon in order to stop him.

There was something in that painting Hannibal wanted him to see.

See?

See?

And CUT!

Will goes to the Brooklyn Museum to take a peek at the William Blake painting of the Great Red Dragon, and runs into… Francis Dolarhyde! Francis is a beefcake and lifts Will up like a sack of potatoes, slamming him into the wall of the elevator and then just yeeting him out the doors. The Dragon gets away, but Will knows what he looks like. The hunt is on, but let's not forget… Francis knows where Will, Molly, and Walter live… thanks to Hannibal.

… stay tuned!

Season 3 Episode 11: …And The Beast From the Sea

Chapter Summary

Will knows that Hannibal knows the Great Red Dragon's name. How can he get Hannibal to give up the information needed to catch the malicious killer?

Chapter Notes

Companion song: “Easier” by Mansionaire

“Face up, untouched, gazing at the ceiling
Game's up, never bring you down
Face up, our love's, craving for some feeling
Game's up, we're nowhere to be found
I'm stuck, I'm stuck, I'm stuck here in my skin
I'm stuck, I'm stuck, I'm stuck with you
Tell me it gets easier, tell me it gets easier
Tell me it gets easier, that I'll figure it out
Tell me it gets easier, tell me it gets easier
Oh, tell me it gets easier, that I'll figure it out
Easier, easier, easier, easier
…
Face up, untouched, craving for some healing
Take off, you're never around
Game's up, it's too much, oh you're the king of cheating
Take off, I'm staring at the ground
Tell me it gets easier, tell me it gets easier
Oh, tell me it gets easier, that I'll figure it out
Tell me it gets easier, tell me it gets easier
Tell me it gets easier, that I'll figure it out
(Easier, easier, easier, easier
Easier, easier, easier, easier)
I'm stuck, I'm stuck, I'm stuck with you
Easier, easier, easier, easier”

This “cut unscene” takes place after Will has encountered Francis Dolarhyde at the Brooklyn Museum, where he was unceremoniously body slammed and then yeeted out of an elevator by the incredibly powerful Great Red Dragon. Will reports back to Jack, who asks, incredulously, “He ate a painting?” Will, Jack, and Alana try to come up with a plan. Jack says, “You must know something about him. Otherwise you wouldn’t have found him.” Will says, “Jack Crawford. Fisher of men. Watching my cork move against

the current. You got me… again. Hannibal told me where to find him. He knows. He knows who the Dragon is. He probably treated him."

This scene follows that meeting, a few hours later.

Alana's perfume wafts in through the circular holes in the safety glass, a new scent she's been wearing lately. It's been a few weeks since her wedding anniversary, so I assume it was a gift from Margot. I don't like it; it's too fruit-forward for her skin's natural scent and wrong for the season. I should never have told her; now she diligently gives herself an extra spritz in the mornings just to offend me. It is retaliation for my anniversary gift. I sent Margot my sketch of Alana as Botticelli's Venus, knowing very well that the breasts depicted are a perfect replica of her wife's. I have studied them at length.

"Hello, Alana," I say, not looking up from my drawing. Today it is Will as a soldier from Botticelli's *The Tragedy of Lucretia,* though I have purposely disregarded the helmet. I wish to draw the texture of his hair, calling its vision and the memory of its touch to the surface of my mind. He wears a metal breastplate, a cloak flowing out behind him as he brandishes his sword, warlike, righteous, ready to spill blood. In the story, the soldiers are only moved to violence after seeing the poor remains of Lucretia, a knife lodged in her breast. Had they not been made to see, the warriors and their generals would lack the passion necessary to topple Rome's powerful aristocracy and establish the Republic. They needed the image of her dead fresh in their minds. A tragedy becomes a tool.

Will has a very vivid imagination; he is both free and damned to imagine anything. He doesn't need to physically see, just be influenced to construct such an image in his mind.

See?

"It seems congratulations are in order." Alana snaps open the drawer and sends a piece of paper through. She stands back, arms crossed over her ridiculously villainous red and black suit.

I patiently put down my pencil and get to my feet, in no real hurry, though I am curious and delighted for this little surprise, whatever it is. The paper in the drawer is printed on good stock and bears an official seal. It is a marriage license, with a forged signature. Apparently I am now married to someone named Annie Wilkes. Ah, I remember. One of the many lonely hearts convinced that matrimonial incarceration was the best way to get a man to fix, yet never have to live with.

"I don't recall accepting her proposal," I say with a tilt of my head. "In fact, I sent her a 'thanks-but-no-thanks'."

"Must have been a mix up," Alana says with vague and dangerous irony. "She's here now, waiting to see you. In private."

In the space of a moment, this situation has metamorphosed into something else entirely, with the potential to be far more dangerous and amusing. “Is she?”

“Don’t worry, you can have it annulled, provided you don’t…” Alana makes a pinched little expression with her violently red lips. “Consummate,” she finishes.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say with a pleasant smile. “I don’t suppose there’s much consummating to be done bound up and wheeled about with a mask on.” Though I managed it, after a fashion, with Will.

Alana only gives me a withering look and leaves.

Within a few minutes, I am visited by Denise and Vincent, my usual two, along with an extra pair I don’t know by sight. They instruct me to take off my jumpsuit, leaving me in my institution-provided undergarments. This is how they strap me into my usual accouterments.

How I instructed Mr. Cummings and Mr. Sullivan to prepare Will for our visits.

Just when I thought I was bored enough to take a nap.

I am wheeled past the visitation area with the cages where Will once lied to me and said he needed my help, with tears no less. Now through a darkened corridor and a locked gate, stopping at a steel door with chipping paint. Unlike every other door in this building, there is no reinforced safety glass to see through any part of it. True privacy. Denise produces a key that she inserts and turns, then is required to pass her plastic card over another scanner. This opens the door.

I am wheeled inside. Denise comes to stand before me, her mace held confidently in one hand, as the men unstrap me from my conveyance and unshackle my legs and midsection. I am free now, except for the jacket.

“Let her decide if she wants the mask off,” Denise suggests, and I hear Vincent sneer a laugh behind me. Denise edges around me and the cart is moved out of the room.

“Could you leave the mace, Denise?” I request, my voice muffled behind the mask, garbled with my jaw being half-locked into place. “I might need it.”

Denise understands my sense of humor. “Might help spice things up in the marriage, huh?” It’s nice to know that even though she threatens to blind me every time we see one another, we can still share a laugh.

I am left alone, and, I assume, unobserved, for the first time in over three years. I feel my body deflate. I drop my shoulders and breathe, a sublime rush of being truly alone traversing each nerve in my body. I hadn’t realized what kind of psychological strain a goldfish must endure. It is good for them that they forget everything they know within minutes, starting their lives anew.

I check myself. Will once told me goldfishes’ poor memories was a common misconception, and seemed almost hostile to the idea that fish in general were unintelligent. He then went off

on a rather long tangent; his passion on the subject was adorable.

All the more torturous for the goldfish, knowing day after day he's being watched.

The room is constructed of dingy cinder blocks, with a concrete floor and no windows, of course. There is a small bed against the wall with an uncovered plastic mattress, and two chairs bolted to the floor, facing one another.

The door behind me opens and I square my shoulders and raise my chin again. I smell him, of course, before I see him. He is very deliberately *not* wearing the ship on the bottle or the cheap aftershave the child gifted him.

I haven't come here to see my blushing bride. Or have I?

"Hannibal," he greets. His voice is soft, mellifluously cooperative.

"Hello, Will." My response is muffled by the mask. I do not turn around, not yet. I want to savor this moment. Will and I, alone.

Well, perhaps not. I haven't seen if he's wearing a wire yet.

"I'd like to, uh, remove the mask. If you promise to play nice."

Nice is one of my least favorite words in English. It is like a weak broth. It describes nothing. Coming from Will's mouth, however, it speaks volumes. I admit to myself that I am in a state of pleasant anticipation for what comes next. "Of course," I say, though if I'm being honest, I'm not sure I can deny myself the opportunity to get my teeth into Will after three years of waiting.

His fingers are trembling as he unbuckles the mask. I savor the feeling of his uncertainty, his disdain, his fear, his familiar touch that transports me back through time for a moment as it folds like a piece of paper. The first time he touched my hair was that night, the first night, when he kissed me so unexpectedly. My unpredictable Will. How could I not perform for him and expect nothing in return after receiving such a gift? And as I bent over to pull him between my lips, his fingers grazed my hair, brushing it behind my ear.

But Will's unpredictability comes from his unwillingness to solidify his desires, messages from his true self. This is why he fled my bed the next morning after we shared that first sweet night. So much of his core identity has always been in flux. There are times of great weight and consequence where he does not know what he will really do until the moment comes.

Will lifts the mask over my head. At last, he steps into my field of vision, holding it awkwardly in his hands for a moment before abandoning it on one of the hard plastic and metal chairs. I can't believe my eyes. He is wearing the shirt I bought for him and sent to his house when he arrived home from this very hospital. The salmon-colored one, selected specifically because of the name and its spectacularly close approximation to the natural hue of the fish in question. I am delighted he kept it. I would have thought he burned every stitch like he burned my letters.

“Oh, Will,” I chuckle. “I wouldn’t have thought you to be so blatant with your reason for being here.” I’m sure he remembers what happened the first time he wore that particular garment. A slow seduction in my office followed by a truce of sorts. I played my harpsichord for him. He performed hungry fellatio, then let me into his body via a different route, wrapping his legs around me. I have never told him how much I adore it when he does that. It is a little secret I keep for myself.

Clever boy. The clothing choice might have been blatant, a peacock spreading his tail feathers, but I should never underestimate Will. He knew the very sight of it would send me spiraling into memories, memories he is counting on to aid his cause.

Willing myself not to physically show my arousal is going to be a monumental challenge.

Will confirms my suspicions by saying, “I thought you’d like a trip down, ah… memory *lane* .”

“There are many fine sights to see along that road,” I say. “And many lovely horrors. Eventually, it leads to betrayal. You wore that for the first time with the intention of deception. Who you were deceiving – me, or yourself – varied day to day.”

Will disrupts the growing atmosphere of distrust by saying, “We’re alone. Legally, they can’t listen in… to this particular room.”

“Have you told my wife you’re in the conjugal chamber with me?” I ask, unable to hide my smile. “I’ve yet to discuss with her the concept of an open marriage. Boundaries are important, Will.”

“It’s fake,” he says. “But we needed it to look official.”

“Of course,” I nod. “Let me rephrase my question. Does *your* wife know you’re here with me?”

“I’m not going to talk about my wife.” His voice goes from velvet to glass, brittle and sharp.

I tongue the nerve. “Perhaps the two of you have already discussed polyamory? I only ask because I don’t want to be the ‘other woman’ in this situation. Infidelity is very rude.”

He laughs, in spite of himself, at my hypocrisy. I think he’s trying to decide if I am joking or not. Doesn’t know how he should react. To any of this. I’ve already derailed his thinly-woven plans and pride swells in me. I have to be careful that it doesn't swell in one particular place.

“Alana always said we were bad with boundaries.”

“And what does your wife say about us?” I can’t help but ask.

“I told you, I’m not talking about her.” Any humor that may have existed is gone. We have gone from barbed teasing to Will’s cold anger, a sweet spring breeze turning suddenly icy as a cloud rolls over the sun.

“Then why are you here?” I challenge him. “Did you want to experience again what we shared when you were incarcerated? With the roles, of course, reversed? I recall you enjoying yourself immensely.”

“Hannibal.” We are back to sweetness. “I thought if we were alone you might be more… *forthcoming* with what you know. About the Dragon.”

I move with what dignity I can muster in the straitjacket and sit down in one of the chairs. He moves the mask and sits across from me. Just like old times. “What makes you think that, Will?” I ask.

“Maybe there’s something you want to say to me that you don’t want Chilton and Alana to hear,” he suggests, bending forward to rest his elbows on his knees and look up at me through that damned errant curl.

“Was this your idea, or Jack’s?” I lean back and cross my bare legs. I note with a flare of triumph the way he glances at them, then pretends he hasn’t, looking me stubbornly in the eyes. “He’s dangled you in front of me so many times I’ve lost count. Wearing that shirt, no less.”

“Group effort,” he admits. “We agree you know who he is. So tell me… was he a patient of yours?”

As if I would ever make it that easy.

I wait a long moment before answering, studying Will’s face to further cement my imago of him. It looks different up close than behind the glass of my cell; softer, somehow, even with the scar. If he was more persistent about styling his hair he could cover most of it. But that wouldn’t be the Will I know.

And love, I am reminded by a little voice that sounds like Bedelia. I slam my mental door in its face.

“You remember what it’s like in here.” I deliberately cross my legs again, switching sides and leaning back against the unforgiving plastic backrest. “An incarceration environment operates like a busy market bazaar – buy, sell, or trade. The privileges I enjoy now were earned by good behavior, cooperation, and a bit of cooking for Dr. Chilton.”

“You want something in return,” Will says, leaning back as well, furrowing his brow. His wrinkles have deepened. I suppose that’s why they’re called ‘worry lines.’

“It is the transactional nature of my environment. Adapt or die,” I say with a little shrug that scratches the buckles of my jacket against the back of the chair. “Tell me, Will – does your wife know what we were to each other years ago? The things we did? How much have you told her?”

“I don’t know how to say this… any more *clearly* . I am *not* talking to *you* about my wife.” Will’s voice has shifted to a low growl and he grips his knees as if trying to stop himself from attacking me outright.

“ *Quid pro quo* , Will.” I give him a little smile. “Something for something, what for what.”

“No,” he states definitively.

“If you want to know about the Dragon…”

Will stands as if to leave.

“You’ll have to offer something else, I suppose,” I sigh. As if I didn’t want *that* even more than I want to gouge Will about his wife, dull creature she likely is. “Isn’t that why you came, washed clean of that atrocious aftershave and wearing that shirt?”

He doesn’t answer. Slowly he sits back in the chair. “You promise to tell the truth?” he asks softly, looking up at me again through the curl.

“I always have. In my own way,” I say.

“Promise,” he insists. He is well aware of how I keep my promises.

“I promise I won’t give you any false information,” I say. That is different from telling the swift and immediate truth. Will knows this, but he is satisfied enough. “Shall we make it a game? I recall one we once played – a game of inferences.”

“I don’t want inferences. I want information. I… *need* information.”

Damn you, Will. Of course you’d use that word and look up at me just so. Even in the poor, flickering fluorescent lighting of this little institutional breeding room he is ruinously beautiful. Keeping my composure is more difficult by the second.

“What for what,” I agree. “Very well. Show me something I’d like to see and I’ll answer your question.”

Will stands. He slides off his jacket and hangs it over the back of the chair. Oh, making those deliberate bedroom eyes at me. There will be no mercy. From either of us. He breaks eye contact to look at his cuffs, unbuttoning them without fanfare, but not in any rush, either. Next, he puts his fingers to the hollow of his throat and frees the clasp there. One at a time, inch by inch, I am granted an unobstructed view of him, of what I once thought I’d owned, and what I will someday again.

The bullet scar just to the center of his right shoulder is new to me, at least in this form. I dug the bullet out and stitched him up in Florence. His healing process was disturbed by our time at Muskrat Farm, but I see, outwardly at least, that it appears to be healed. A half inch in any direction and it would have shattered a bone. Chiyoh is a remarkable shot.

I greet my old friends; the prominent line over his navel, and Jack’s glancing bullet on his left shoulder, cutting into the deltoid muscle.

He’s filled out, just a bit, lost that starving leanness of losing his mind or surviving imprisonment, or the vanished appetite of longing. I imagine his wife is fattening him on a

diet of atrocious casseroles and meatloaf. And they call me a criminal. How could he stomach her tuna surprise after dining at my table?

I want to taste him so badly my mouth waters. I order myself to be patient. This is a rare opportunity and I can't waste it by being hasty.

He folds the shirt over the chair behind him and lets me look, jutting his chin just a little in defiance of my visual grope. His scent is stronger now, unmitigated by the barrier of cloth.

You're starved for touch.

So are you. At least in the way you want to be touched.

So observant. I should have known back then the ruin I faced.

"No, he was never my patient," I say. It is the truth. I did promise, after all. "You're bruised." There are marks on the side of one shoulder, his side, and a darker, mottled spot on his hip. It looks like he was thrown. "I see the Dragon is a worthy adversary. I assume you encountered him?"

Will nods. "I've got a face, a couple of partial prints, but no name. Nothing else to go on."

The room is warm enough, but I can see texture bloom on his skin as he gives a little shiver he likely tried very hard to suppress. This is delightful. If I can stay in control. Three years feels like a lifetime ago. But I manage to slow my heart and keep my blood pressure steady with a clandestine breath or two.

"How is he choosing them?" Will hooks his thumb into his belt with one hand, and toys with the buckle with his other.

I would call on God for help if we were on speaking terms.

"He covets them," I say as Will eases his belt strap free of the buckle, folding it back and then forward again. His fingers trace the button once before unclasping it. He lets his trousers pool on the concrete floor, then steps out of them and his footwear, toeing it off entirely and spreading his bare feet on the cold concrete below. Same cheap shorts as always, pale gray with a dark band. I devour his outline with my gaze and I'm greatly rewarded.

"We covet what we see," Will says, taking a step towards me and leaving his piled clothing behind. "How does he see them?"

"I suspect he works in an industry that allows him a glimpse into families' lives from afar," I suggest, as Will passes his hand briefly over his abdominal scar. A searing thrill of desire rakes through me when the pads of his fingers touch the place where my knife penetrated him. "If we were still in the age of printed photographs I would suggest a photo processing center. Now that everything's online, you'll have to dig into that one yourself."

"Hmm." Will steps closer to me again. I've barely given him anything to go on, yet here he is, pushing one of my legs off the other with an impatient hand to sit on my lap, facing me. He puts his arms around my neck and I reel, consumed by his scent and his living breath, the

warmth he exudes, the sweet, heady mixture of his pheromones. This is absolutely diabolical. I pray his conscience doesn't catch up with him before we've had our fun. That he will delight in this wickedness uninterrupted.

I cannot conceal my pressing anatomy, and he is making no attempt to, happy enough, it seems to telegraph its presence.

His next question, whispered softly, is, "Why does he covet them?"

The same reason I covet you, I don't say. *He wants a connection. He wants a family like the one he never had. Or in my case, the one that was ripped away from me.*

"You have something rather significant in common with him," I tease as Will braces his legs against the chair's and draws us closer. The barrier of the straitjacket is maddening.

"Yeah? What's that?"

I keep my mouth closed and smirk up at him.

"What's that little tidbit going to cost me?"

"What are you offering?"

He leans in and whispers in my ear. "How about I promise *not* to kill you?" He amends his statement with, "today."

This earns him a silent chuckle. "Nothing so elaborate, Will."

"Then name your price."

"A kiss," I request.

He gives it to me, and I am suddenly a low creature, all instinct, no intellect. Three years. Three agonizing years of unanswered letters and powerful dreams and my litany of memories.

Stupid of me. I'd forgotten the extent of his power over me. The entire world has underestimated Will Graham, and though I should know better, I cannot seem to wrap my head around it.

Speaking of things that are wrapped around other things, I am desperate to be out of the jacket, especially now that Will has allowed himself to run his hand back through my hair and down the side of my face, cradling the underside of my jaw, the heel of his hand against my throat.

And just like that, he pulls away, leaving me open-mouthed in the brutal air. His arms are still around my neck, but I want that sacred touch again.

"No," he checks me. "Give it up, Dr. Lecter."

“You were both abandoned by your mothers,” I say.

There is a hard line to his mouth now that wasn’t there before. I wish I could have told him something else, but I promised I would tell the truth. “How old was he?”

“Younger than you, I expect.” I shut my mouth. I’m dangerously close to giving away too much.

“It strikes me,” Will says conversationally as he runs the pad of his ring finger over my bottom lip, purposely showing off his gold band. “That, ah, he’s of two minds. That there’s a battle – something my aunt’s preacher would call a… spiritual crisis. Am I headed in the right direction?”

“For that,” I say, “I’ll need your tongue.”

“Gonna bite it off?” he challenges, catching my hair and pulling it to angle back my head.

“Not until I can braise it and serve it with sauce gribiche,” I assure him.

He moves in slowly, making me wait for it. I cannot stop my heart now, how fast my breaths are invading and vacating my lungs. No doubt my pupils are dilated, the vessels near the surface of my skin giving me a telltale blush, though never as dark as Will’s is.

He is as sweet and delicious as ever. Three years of aging has mellowed his flavor like a fine wine ripens in the barrel. As promised, he gives me his tongue, the powerful wet muscle working against mine. He accepts my penetration as well, readily, dare I say greedily. It isn’t easy, having no hands free, but I squirm to the side and drift my mouth away from his toward his throat. I am desperate for this. I’ve sketched his neck countless times and in each instance I am crippled with want to the verge of physical pain.

He yanks my head back by the hair and angles away. “Don’t you dare leave a fucking mark on me,” he warns, breathless, eyes alight. “Even where nobody can see it.”

I grin in the face of his alleged anger. I know him. I know he would like nothing more. Especially now, when it is so forbidden. What if the wife were to come and visit? Saw a mark on his neck in a Freddie Lounds paparazzi photo, a bruise so clearly the result of passion? “What will it cost me?” I whisper over his lips before he kisses me again.

“Tell me where he lives, and I’ll let you.”

I desperately attempt to rut up against him, but he tenses his legs against the sides of the chair to hold me down. “I don’t know where he lives,” I admit. “But I can tell you where he likely grew up.”

“Not good enough.” Will cocks his head, daring me to reveal more. “No deal.”

“May I suggest a counter offer?” I lean in again for his throat but he denies me stubbornly, though his arms are still draped around my neck.

“You may.”

“I can tell you where he’s traveled, and recently.”

Will scoffs. “I don’t need to know where he’s been – I know where he’s been. I need to know where he’s headed.”

“It’s verifiable. He flew there. You might get lucky with a passenger manifest,” I tell him, though I know the Dragon has a second passport.

He considers, nods yes. Leaning back, he offers me his clavicle, shoulder, pectoral. I lick the bullet scar I tended in Florence a lifetime ago, measuring its circumference with the tip of my tongue. I moisten the scar and the skin around it before closing my lips to deliver the suck-bruise. Will tosses his head back and grimaces, an ambrosial half-stifled cry escaping his lips.

I examine my handiwork. I’ve never done this to him over a scar and it stands out starkly against the livid skin around it. I lean in for his throat but he pulls away. “Where did he go?”

“Hong Kong,” I reveal. He looks genuinely surprised. So many of his questions he knows the answers to. This interrogation is for show. He was looking for an excuse, I’m sure of it. But Hong Kong is new information. I hope I haven’t doomed the Dragon, now that he’s become so interesting. It wouldn’t be the first time Will has disrupted my good sense.

“Why?”

“All things he does in service to the Great Red Dragon,” I say. “Though one day he may claim his own power. God help you then.”

“He and the Dragon don’t always see eye-to-eye?”

I tilt my head forward and he allows the kiss, though it is brief. “I expect they’ll differ on one major topic in the future, if they haven’t quarreled about it already.”

“And that’s…”

“Going to cost you,” I finish. This is breathtaking. The idea of Will being transactional with his affections infuriated me when he used charm to manipulate his proxy; it brought out a primal, licentious jealousy in me. Now I am left only with the primal licentiousness, and I revel in it. Something about Will, poor, heart-battered, touch-starved Will using himself for currency – at last seeing his *worth* – is intoxicating to me. I also know that I am being used, and not only for information.

Will *has* missed me. Will needed the thinnest thread of an excuse to come see me, and to make love to me, which I am quite sure he is going to do before he leaves the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane tonight.

When Jack Crawford dangled Will before me on a hook, over and over again, did he ever suspect that something like this would happen? Is he still oblivious to the numerous ways I’ve swallowed Will’s bait, amongst other things? And yet I kept clear of the net until I

jumped into the boat of my own free will. One of these days I am going to break the line and swim back down to the murky depths with Will in my mouth, hook and all.

Will teases the waistband of my undergarment with his fingertips after moving back on my thighs to give himself room to do so. He skims his thumb against my swollen anatomy for the tiniest touch; he then puts his hand back on my shoulder. The resulting spike in my desire makes me ache. “I’m not going to touch you,” Will threatens, “until you tell me… their point of *disagreement* .”

“Love,” I say simply. “He’s capable of it. Not even a cheap facsimile – the real thing. The Dragon sees it as a weakness, but through it, the man may find the strength he needs to unhook the beast from his back.”

“How?”

I exhale through a tiny smile. Will, at last, lowers his hand between us once more. He begins by torturing me again, using just the tips of two of his fingers to tease out my length to where it points up at my navel. Despite the minimal touch, I am completely at his mercy, tipping my head forward, resting it on his shoulder in an unconscious display of how he owns me in this moment. “When is a weakness a strength?” I whisper against his skin.

“Love might make him stop,” Will reasons, the cogs of his profiler’s mind working even as he fondles me through the frustrating layer of cloth, mapping my outline, stroking, squeezing. I grind against his hand, dropping my head back, exposing my throat. Like many situations with Will, not wise, but somehow inescapable. “That’s what he’s after, with the families.”

“Will.” I say his name as though I am whispering it through the screen to the anonymous priest. I crave his absolution though he should, by right, crave mine. This, always this, forever.

Will stands and drops his undergarment, then swiftly helps me out of mine. He plants those lovely knees on the depressing concrete floor and slides his hands along my thighs where I sit, so ready for him I’m beading at the tip. The look on his face is sublime. I’ve hosted enough dinner parties to know when someone is hungry, and impressed at the main course’s presentation. Will runs his hands up my thighs, closer to the center, but, of course, doesn’t touch me yet.

“He was an unwanted child. Didn’t have the luxury you had, Will – a father to love him in his own way…” I lose my thoughts entirely when Will opens his mouth and draws me in. I want to weep. It feels so warmly comforting I nearly lose control, especially when he makes a sound signaling his pleasure at the taste, another word in the language of the dinner table I’m quite familiar with.

I am granted a few moments and tongue movements before he stops, holding me in his hand instead. “And…?”

“Grew up with relatives. They didn’t want him either.”

“Because he was deformed?”

“Because he existed,” I say. “Though the deformity didn’t hel…” I lose my word in a moan as Will fulfills his side of the bargain once more, drawing me in deep. He has lost none of his skill. It makes me wonder what else he’s been doing behind his wife’s back. All of it behind *my* back.

“Anger at a maternal figure. Explains the necrophilic obsession with the women, the rest of the family to witness.” Will doesn’t wait for my confirmation before lifting me back into his mouth, but I give him what for what.

“His mother he never knew. Hated her because she left. But whoever stepped into that role was a far worse maternal figure than–than an– absent… one…” I curse softly as Will drops me from between his lips again, flicking the head with his tongue. Then he draws away, reaching into the pocket of his crumpled trousers and bringing out the bottle.

“You always came prepared when you visited me,” he explains when I let out a disbelieving chuckle.

“I’m curious to hear what you require of me to earn penetration,” I say, panting, trying to keep my voice even and only vaguely interested. It is a complete failure.

Will kneels and prepares himself, glancing at me every so often. “You know his name,” he says.

“Yes.”

“Tell me his name,” Will suggests, lubricating me as well. “Tell me his name and you can fuck me.”

He doesn’t make good on his threat. He can’t help himself. I gaze at him in adoration and triumph as he slides onto my lap and inserts me, using his weight to guide me in. His face is priceless, contorted with effort and unadulterated pleasure. At last, he rests on my thighs, arms around my neck again, leaning his head against my shoulder. I try to thrust up into him but he tightens his legs around the chair again to keep me from moving.

Being inside him after so long is a religious experience, feeling that deep, lock-and-key connection, surrounded by his tight warmth and bathed in his scent, sweat from his brow glancing off my cheekbone.

“Tell me his name.” Will repeats his demand. This is a thousand times worse than not penetrating him at all. I can’t move, and cannot without his help. I ache for release.

“I can’t tell you his name,” I manage through quivering breaths. “I can tell you something about it, Will, but you have to move.”

He doesn’t need much more coaxing than that. He braces himself and uses the back of the chair and the floor for leverage, moving himself along my shaft, finding a rhythm and an angle that brings him pleasure as well, which is almost as arousing as having him stimulate me.

“He hates his name, his first name,” I reveal through hitching breaths and Will’s lips as they catch mine intermittently. “It’s unisex but feminine-sounding. That’s why – he resents – being called Tooth Fairy –”

Will mumbles some half-formed profanity as he climaxes and clenches me. I spill immediately in response and he is kissing me again, hands splayed on either side of my head, fingers in my hair and curving around my ears, deep, starving kisses punctuated by his little quivering breaths.

For an exquisite minute he just holds me, forehead pressed into my neck. I rest my cheek against his shoulder and breathe.

Then I feel the rigidity return to his body, the denial and the shame. I don’t know why I expected otherwise. “Ready to berate yourself for your wickedness?” I ask him as he gets up and retrieves some tissues from his coat to clean himself up a bit before yanking his underwear back on.

He doesn’t answer as he helps me back into mine. He won’t look at me until he’s pulled his trousers up, sitting on the chair to replace his footwear. “Thank you for your cooperation,” he says coolly. As if I couldn’t tell how much making love to me meant to him, how much he missed me, my touch.

“That was easier than I thought.” I can’t stop the pettiness. I’m here because of him. I’m here for him, and though our reunion was sweet, he’s trying to sever our connection once more, as if that was possible. Despite everything, I do feel used. “You and your wife must be a little more adventurous in bed than I suspected. Does she enjoy… what’s it called–”

“Don’t talk about my wife–” he warns, buttoning his shirt with angry fingers.

“-pegging you?”

“Don’t,” he repeats, icy now, sliding into his jacket. “Or I’m going to let that lady come in and mace you. She really, *really* wants to.”

“I suppose that makes two of you,” I snap.

He doesn’t answer.

“Tick tock, Will,” I try instead. “I do hope what I was able to tell you saves the next family from gruesome execution. How many days are left?”

He slips the bite mask back over my face, and leaves without another word. His eyes are glacial.

After a time, I am re-shackled, re-loaded, and wheeled back to my cell, where I am then freed.

I have spent years in this room. I have trained my mind not to see its dimensions, not to feel the walls closing in. Somehow I have lost my grip on that ability. I pace. I feel like a zoo

animal. I am furious with myself for letting Will seduce me, for giving away what I did about the Dragon.

The Great Red Dragon.

Don't talk about my wife.

Easy enough to avoid the subject if she's dead.

I gave Will three years. Yes, I wrote to him, hoped he'd visit, but I did not engage in active manipulations to bring him to me. I could have. I could have arranged my escape. I did not. I waited. He came.

Jack asked, and he could have refused. But I gave him three years for a reason. I wanted him to realize that playing house with a wife and child is not the life he really wants, despite what he's convinced himself. There is no reversing the transformation that's already underway. It is merely lying dormant, or it was, until he came to see me again.

I once told Will he awakened me. Now I will awaken him.

Transformation can be painful. It often is. Will's has covered him with scars. And now he's brought agony on himself again as he fights against me. He has condemned the wife and the child. Dragged them into our world with no real regard for their safety.

A bit careless, and more than a little cruel; using a single woman and her child in a vain attempt to prove he can be the father down the street, the one who hosts barbecue dinners, attends football games, and mows the lawn on Sundays after church. He should have known full well that he would never truly belong in that Stepford world. Will's blindness to his own true nature, his resistance to me, is going to cost him – again.

Enough. Will is mine. He belongs to me, and to himself – the self he is becoming.

I look at my sketch of Will as the soldier, driven to violence as he beholds Lucretia's body.

He must see her dead. In his mind, or with his own eyes.

I will send the Dragon.

...and CUT!

Hannibal sends the Great Red Dragon Will's home address. The GRD poisons the dogs (though they recover, the show is sure to let us know that!) and targets Molly and Walter. Molly outsmarts him and escapes, but the compartmentalization Will achieved in his mind is shattered. Now he is plagued with visions of his wife as though she'd been "changed" by the GRD. He can never go home...

...stay tuned!

Season 3 Episode 12: The Number of the Beast is 666…

Chapter Summary

Hannibal fakes a heart attack to go to the infirmary, where Will is waiting, filled with righteous fury. Hannibal sent the Great Red Dragon to kill Molly and Walter, and Will wants to make him pay...

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “How Can This Be Wrong” by Glitch Mob (feat. Tula)

“Hit you like a wave
Washing over me
'Cause I can hear you call my name
And I won't tell no one
You say you're gone now
I hear you call my name
I hear you calling out
I can't have you break like a child
When you feel so right
So right
How can this be wrong?
When you break like a child
When you feel so right
So right
How can this be wrong?”

“He’s not the Dragon,” Jack says, righteousness burning through his words, a frosty fire. “You are. The Devil himself. Bound in the pit.”

“Then that makes you God, Jack.”

“Yes, it does.” I didn’t expect him to agree. His relentlessness has transformed into something else, something far more dangerous. He’s found religion in himself, the same righteousness that Will has tapped into.

“All gods demand sacrifices,” I say.

“Maybe they do,” Jack says, narrowing his eyes at me through the glass. “Or maybe they just want to see who’s faithful. Stop them right before the knife breaks the skin.”

“Timing is everything,” I remind him. “There is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven.”

Jack looks at his watch. “Right now, it’s time for me to go, and for you to rot in here.”

“Goodbye, Jack,” I call after him. He does not turn back.

The more I echo Jack’s words in my mind, his reference to Abraham being called to sacrifice his beloved son on Mt. Moriah, the more sure I am that Jack has completely disregarded Will’s safety yet again. *God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.* My anger roils through my body, and it is with effort that I keep my face expressionless and my blood pressure even, my breathing steady. As always, Jack is more than ready to journey to the mountain, tie Will hand and foot, and place him on a pyre. He’ll lift the knife, confident that at the last moment, an angel will descend from Heaven and stay the blade, quench the fire.

I have no doubt Jack would feed Will to the Dragon if it meant catching him.

I have to lie down for a time to reach a state of equilibrium again. By that time, I have adjusted the tableau in my mind to better reflect our conversation.

I have the knife. Will is the sacrifice, and Jack is God. He thinks he can stop me at the last second. He has the hubris to consider such nonsense, that he can swoop in at the final moment on heavenly wings.

Why didn’t Will let me kill him? Why didn’t he help me kill him? How many times will Jack dangle Will in front of a killer? Why does Will keep letting himself be dangled? It comes, I suspect, from an ingrained insecurity he’s always had. A desire to worthy. Serving a greater purpose through sacrifice. He is the Lamb, certainly. But the other side of the Lamb, its other face, is that of the Lion. A predator of righteous violence.

Denise comes with the mail. I get up dutifully and stand behind the table, still thinking about Abraham and Isaac, Jack and Will, and my new friend, the Great Red Dragon. When the doors shut behind her, I open the few pieces of correspondence, then glance through the Sun.

Someone has started the crossword puzzle.

I enjoy looking at the clues – usually ridiculously easy, unless asking about television characters or vapid celebrities, in which case I have no chance of knowing – and it irks me, those little faint pencil marks, until I realize it is a code. The first letter of each word filled in, when listed in numerical order, spells INFIRMARY.

Fascinating. Will I encounter Will, or the Dragon? Someone else entirely?

When Denise comes back for another walk-through, she finds me seated on the floor next to my bed, clutching my left arm. I tell her breathlessly that I have chest pains. She takes her time calling for backup to transport me. If this was a real cardiac event, I would likely not

survive it due to the lack of a speedy response. How unsettling – the thought of dying without any kind of spectacle.

I am ordered onto a gurney. Before I would have time to resist, I am strapped down hand and foot by four orderlies at once, Denise sliding on my bite mask. I continue my charade of the cardiac event as I am wheeled through the dark hallways.

The infirmary is deserted, save Dr. Kapanski, who has the night shift here. He was once a decent spinal surgeon, but the long hours left him with a nasty cocaine habit that resulted in his surgery privileges being revoked at almost every hospital in town. This placement is perfect for him, really; his malpractice can be easily concealed, and no one would believe half the things his patients might say, as they are all mad.

“Put him there,” Dr. Kapanski orders, and I am wheeled next to the EKG machine, the bed angled into its most upright position. The orderlies stand back as if to wait, but Dr. Kapanski orders them to leave.

“Doc, we’re not supposed to…”

“I’m serious. Get the fuck out.”

“It’s not safe,” Denise insists.

“Do you all like your jobs, or…?” Kapanski lets the question hang in the air, scratching at the back of his bald head. I believe he still has the cocaine habit.

They file out one at a time. Denise gives me a deadly look that tells me to behave myself. “ *I will mace you* ,” she mouths, miming a spraying motion to her own face. She points two fingers at her eyes then swivels them back to me.

After they are gone, Dr. Kapanski ignores me completely and opens another door after sliding back the deadbolt.

Will Graham steps through the dark doorway. He moves warily, and I can see the bulge of the gun in his jacket. There is a manila envelope tucked under his arm. He studies me for a long moment. I pull on my bed restraints with a half smile, showing him how little movement I have with the thick cuffs on my ankles and wrists and a leather strap around my chest.

I hope my smile reaches my eyes. He can’t see it with the bite mask on…

…Will turned to the doctor and handed him the envelope. Kapanski tore it open with shaky, impatient fingers, and shook out the surveillance photos that showed him buying drugs and visiting a “massage parlor” before coming in for his shift at the Baltimore State Hospital. The prints were there, as well as a flash drive with the original images. “No copies?” he demanded, shoving everything back in the envelope.

Will shook his head.

The doctor sneered. “And I’m supposed to believe that?”

“Maybe this’ll help.” Will handed him a roll of bills. “That oughta keep you supplied for a while, right? What is the going rate for blow these days?”

The doctor snatched the money out of Will’s hand, tore off the rubber band and started counting.

“Go,” Will ordered.

“You sure about this? You know how many people he’s killed?”

“I don’t think anyone will ever really know,” Will said, shooting Hannibal a murderous glance. The dark eyes that peered at him above the bite mask sparkled with amusement. Will gritted his teeth, poisonous, angry bile rising up in the back of his throat.

“You’re insane if you want to be alone with him.” Even as Kapanski spoke, he was halfway to the door.

“‘Spose I am,” Will said flatly. “Go, and make sure nobody comes in.”

“It’s your funeral.”

“Don’t spend it all in one place,” Will advised as the doctor shut and locked the door. This earned him a short, snide laugh.

It was quiet now. They were alone. Will rifled through a few drawers before finding a scalpel. He held it up to the light so Hannibal could see it, and tested its edge against his finger. “I know I told you I’d kill you with my hands,” he said conversationally. The deadly rage, the blinding vengeful righteousness pumped through his veins with every beat of his dark, guarded, hardened heart. He pushed the feeling at Hannibal as hard as he could, trying to infect him with it, to make him understand the white-hot fury that threaded through every vein, capillary, blood cell. “Does slitting your throat count?”

“Not especially,” Hannibal said, the words muffled under the mask. Will went to his bedside and slipped it off, holding the scalpel blade to the flesh under Hannibal’s eye.

“I can make it more intimate, if you want.” Will was proud of himself. His voice didn’t tremor for even a single syllable despite the trembling he felt in his core, the seismic event of his soul. “Snapping your neck seems fast. How about I strangle you?”

“That would be preferable.” Hannibal said it mildly, with a mundane, chatty tone. “I’d like to see your face. I’ve always enjoyed that particular angle. Being under you.”…

… Will is indescribably beautiful when he is murderous. Even if I am the victim. But it wouldn’t do for him to murder me, as proud as I would be.

He puts the scalpel down on the counter and takes off his jacket, rolling up the sleeves of his brown Henley. It's been years since I've seen that particular garment, before I framed him for murder if memory serves. It is rustic, basic, but it suits him so well I can't contain my smile.

He takes off his wedding ring and sets it next to the scalpel. Objectively it may interfere with his ability to throttle the life out of me. In other ways it is a keen symbol. I feel adrenaline and norepinephrine trickle into my blood from my cerebral cortex.

"You knew," he growls at me, eyes vast and dead and dark, the primordial orbs of a fish. "You knew they were next. You knew what he would-would try and… do to them."

"Change them, yes," I say.

"Kill them," Will insists, looming over my bed. "Mutilate them. *Defile* my wife's *body* …!" He climbs onto the gurney and pins me down at the hips. Will circles his hands roughly around my neck. I swallow; the feeling of my laryngeal prominence sliding against his hands is deeply sensual. "You sent him to do that. To kill an 11-year-old boy…" I can feel him trembling with rage. It is not all that different, on the surface, from the way he trembled under my touch when I took his virginity.

"They're not my family, Will," I remind him. " *You* are family. The way Chiyoh is my family. The way Abigail was. You more so than either."

I can see a kind of clearing on his brow as it smooths ever so slightly. "I'm not dead," he says, "because I'm family…" He can't seem to fathom it, shaking his head as if the thoughts might resettle like tea leaves at the bottom of the porcelain cup.

"You put your wife and stepson in harm's way," I correct him. "The second you gave a thought to joining them as a father figure. You did this. You pulled them into our world, knowing I still walked the earth. What did you think would happen?"

His lip quivers. Will sits back on my hips. His hands slide away from my neck and grip the safety railings on either side of the gurney instead, knuckles white. "Whenever I close my eyes," he rasps, a pained whisper, "I see her as if he'd… gotten to her. I see her dead."

"Do you see yourself reflected in the shards of mirror?" I ask him, my voice soft, encouraging.

His eyes shine, encased as they are in crystalline tears. He nods…

…Will swallowed down the growing lump of hot gravel in his throat. "You made sure," he managed, voice thick with arrested tears, "that I could never go home again. You might as well have… burned our house to th-the *ground* ."

Hannibal's eyes were gentle, as was his voice, the pretense of comfort, though he was the one who had orchestrated this cascade of sorrow. "I did you a favor, Will. You are almost blind to

your own true feelings, no more able to express them than the scar on your forehead can blush."

Unconsciously, Will reached up and ran his hand over it, feeling the ridge of knotty tissue there with his fingertips. He remembered the terrible buzzing of the saw like an enormous wasp, the fount of blood spilling over his eyebrow, obscuring his view of Jack. He felt numb, liminal, a void in the wake of his righteous violence. "And what…a-are my true feelings, then… if you're so certain?"

"You knew you'd never belong there," Hannibal told him, clear, matter-of-fact. "Even as you slid a ring on her finger, and she placed that one on yours–" he nodded to the gold circle on the counter, "-you knew. Didn't you, Will?"

Will looked at the ring. It glinted dully in the subdued lights of the nighttime infirmary. "She called me… a sweet man," he murmured, a tear sliding down his cheek and hanging from the edge of his jaw like a piece of crystal fruit waiting to be plucked.

"And I've called you a miracle," Hannibal said, each word in his voice, his accent, made of silky ash. "And beautiful. And mine."...

… Will turns his gaze back to me. His tears have stopped, but they still trouble me. I wish I was free to brush them away. When will he learn to stop making this so difficult for himself?

Then his mouth firms up, and I can see the muscles of his jaw beneath his stubble. "I've been to see Bedelia," he says. "A few times, actually. She's taking over my, ah… *therapy* ."

"How is Bedelia?" I ask, an attempt to deflect that Will doesn't fall for.

"Insightful," he answers, bending at the waist and resting his hands on the cheap cushion that covers the gurney so our faces are inches apart. His scent temporarily overwhelms me and I sense trouble. "She said that you daily feel a… *stab of hunger* for me. And that you find *nourishment* at the very sight of me. I don't think she meant it literally."

"How did she mean it?" I immediately think of Bedelia's letter and my heart stumbles. I wonder if it would, in fact, be prudent to take a reading with the EKG and see if I'm suffering from an arrhythmia.

"I think the damndest part is that all of… *this*... " Will seems to mean my attempt on his family's life, and everything, perhaps as far back as the first time we met. "Is your sick, twisted way of telling me… that you *love me* , Hannibal. Not just fond, not just amused, not just curious. That you are *in love* with me."

I find myself unable to speak, or move, an animal trapped in the headlights of an oncoming car, frozen before his doom. "Is… that… all she said?" I hear myself say.

"She asked me if I *ache* for you." Will's lips are closer now. I can feel his breath against mine, the aura of his body's warmth, the heat of his fury and the rising essence of passion.

Whether or not it is sexual or homicidal, I suppose I'll find out soon enough.

"Do you?"

He closes the distance. Says, "Yes," before pressing his mouth against mine…

…Will lost himself. His self, his core. Everything he thought or believed, his stories, experiences, scars, life, truth. It all drained away, eroded, powerfully there and then gone like a desert rain.

He knew, then, looking into Hannibal's eyes, confronting him with Bedelia's words, that it was true.

Hannibal *was* in love with him.

And Will wanted that love. Desperately. Craved it.

Julien cared about him, but only through the *imago* of Hannibal that had somehow imprinted on his psyche. Margot used him as a sperm donor without his consent. Alana might have loved him. Maybe part of her still did, the way she protected him despite her best interest. But she didn't choose him. She was too smart to do what Molly had done — embraced him with the intent to fix him. He wasn't Molly's first choice, the love of her life. Austin was dead, Walter needed a father, and Molly... she saw the good in him, true. She wanted to support his new life. She genuinely cared for him.

But she didn't think Will was a *miracle* .

No one else loved him like this. And even though it was horrific and wrong and crazy, Will recognized that this was the kind of love he'd always craved.

Hannibal *chose* him. Will was not a consolation prize. He was *the* prize. He was the treasure. He was gold.

And right now, that was all he cared about. All that mattered, despite everything, all the harm they'd done to others and to each other.

There was only the kiss.

And now another. Will rested his fingertips lightly against the place on Hannibal's face where chin met jaw. Hannibal made a soft, encouraging sound, as if savoring something. Will could feel him straining against the straps that trapped him to the gurney. Hannibal's hands could just touch Will's thighs, and he caressed them through the fabric of Will's jeans at length while Will bent over him, brushing his lips down Hannibal's neck to the maddening collar of the white jumpsuit. Pulling back, he curved his hand around the fine cut of Hannibal's cheek.

"You, ah… really like the view from down there?" Will asked with a perilous little smile.

"Very much."…

…Will reaches over to the counter and picks up the scalpel.

Well, then. Just when I was quite sure he wasn't going to kill me.

He holds it for a moment, looking at the blade as if debating with himself. Then he dismounts. I am thrilled with lust and terror when he turns his attention to my groin. Not the eating of my genitals I would prefer, but strapped down like this I can only be curious what Will will do. I think he knows I am needed alive to catch the Dragon. But there are other things he can do to me that will not kill me.

He does not slice me open, just my clothing, since the restraints prevent the traditional removal of the cursed jumpsuit. He abandons the blade next to his gold band and opens the drawer where the doctors keep their prostate exam lubricant; industrial, inelegant, but effective. He remembers the exact location because I used it on him, once.

I settle now into the concept that I may not die or be mutilated today, but with Will, one never knows. In truth, he's done me enough damage, repeating Bedelia's words, and admitting again to his own feelings. As much as I am aware of my love for him, it is still terrifying to have it out in the open. Much more so than being strapped down hand and foot and at Will's mercy, armed as he is with both gun and blade. I'm at the mercy of his love now, of his knowledge that I am no longer my own man. Part of me belongs to him. Even if I escape this prison, I will never be entirely free. The days of total control and independence are over, and have been over since I met Will – these things I had once prized above all else. Killing him, even, would be no remedy.

As I've told Will many times before, change can be difficult, transformations painful. I must remind myself of the same thing.

Will is teasing me now, touching me gently through the slits he's made in the cloth. He climbs back on the stretcher and slicks his hand, slipping it into the openings again. I can do nothing but move my hips a little, which I do, trying to rut against his palm. I strain against the straps and cuffs and it brings a smile to Will's lips.

There is little foreplay, besides our conversations. Will takes me. He presses into me, meets resistance, and continues without hesitation. I am as relaxed as I can be, but it's been a long time and I am not prepared. The pain is inconsequential. It's an unholy vision, him at this angle, flushed and sweating, even though he is almost fully dressed, having only freed the button and zipper of his trousers to penetrate me. The gun in its holster strapped to his side undulates along with his rhythm…

… He tried to kill Walter and Molly.

But he loves me.

He tried to kill me and eat my brain.

Only because Bedelia told him that was the best way to save himself from the vulnerability of loving me, and he was hurt and scared enough to believe it.

He killed Abigail.

Because I betrayed him. And it hurt so profoundly because he loves me.

He killed Georgia.

Because she was going to identify him.

Beverly…?

My fault. I pushed her right into him. Didn't leave him with much of a choice.

He is a monster.

But he loves me.

He is a cannibal.

But he loves me…

…Will slows and pulls out. I have to admit that I never could be *completely* sure what is going on in Will's mind, and this is evidenced by how he kisses me now, reverent and sweet, as though he has been given a gift, something he's always wanted, always needed, but never thought he would have. Now he is touching me with adoring attention, intent on my pleasure, which he conjures from me first internally and then externally. The power of these climaxes leaves me shaking and weak after straining at my bonds.

Now he enters again, but he is gentle and unhurried, almost more interested in kissing me, stroking my hair and face. His eyes have lost their flinty danger. They are a soft, misty aqua. He winds his fingers in my hair again as his breathing changes, catching now, halting with strain. I purposely clench and it catches him mid-stroke. He shudders against me.

And now he rests, his face in the crook of my neck. I angle my chin to press as kiss on his head before laying my cheek there…

… Can't kill him myself.

Can't kill me himself.

Can't live without him.

Can't live without him.

Can't live without him.

Can't live with him.

Can't live.

We can't live…

…Will seems to force himself off me with unbridled reluctance. He tucks himself back in and adjusts my situation as he can. Perhaps at first glance one might not notice the slices near my seams.

He seems like he is going to leave without a word, but he hesitates, and returns to kiss me, just once, a gentle meeting of our lips.

"Will," I say, softly, as I might scare him away. "Do you remember what I said to the Dragon?"

Will's eyes are suddenly chipped ice, the jagged block I used to make punch romaine for Bedelia and Professor Sogliato, so clear and cold. "Save yourself, kill them all," he murmurs through gritted teeth.

"You might take that under advisement when Jack inevitably asks you to act as bait for the Great Red Dragon," I say. "I don't trust FBI to snatch you out of his jaws in time."

"Even if it means… feeding him someone else?" Will touches the back of his fingers to my face, a brief caress.

"Yes," I say. "That would be a perfect solution."

Will nods, gives me a lingering glance, and leaves.

…and CUT!

Will takes Hannibal's advice to heart in the next scene. He calls Jack out for having him on the hook. Then, once they've hatched a plan that involves enraging the Dragon using Freddie Lounds, Will deliberately puts his hand on Chilton's shoulder like a pet. This encourages the dragon to kidnap Chilly, bite off his lips, and light him on fire. Bedelia says that Hannibal has agency in the world… because he has Will. When Will watches the tape showing the mutilation, he breaks down hearing Chilton screaming, but later, to Bedelia, says, "Damned if I will feel."

He is Becoming!

...stay tuned!

Season 3 Episode 13: The Wrath of the Lamb

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal are intimate one more time before the Dragon arrives.

Chapter Notes

Companion Song: “Love Crime” by Siouxie

“Oh, the skies tumbling from your eyes
So sublime, the chase to end all time
Seasons call and fall, from grace and uniform
Anatomical and metaphysical

Oh, the dye
A blood red setting sun
Rushing through my veins
Burning up my skin

I will survive,
live and thrive
Win this deadly game
LOVE CRIME,
LOVE CRIME
I will survive,
live and thrive
I will survive,
I will survive
I will.”

Well, here we are. The Wrath of the Lamb…

The Great Red Dragon has freed Hannibal and killed everyone in the armed escort except Will, which must have been a conscious choice. Who will the Dragon side with, Hannibal or Will? Does he even know?

Hannibal kicks the dead cops out of a police cruiser and asks Will, “Going my way?” He takes Will to one of his safe houses, a modern-style mansion on the coast. After driving up the long, secluded driveway…

I park the stolen patrol car in the garage next to the cloth-draped Bentley. The sight of its graceful silhouette provokes a certain longing – while the cruiser's engine was powerful, the drive enjoyable, I wish I could have been behind the wheel of my automobile once more. Of course, there is no time now. The Dragon is coming.

Will did not speak during the drive, ostensibly to listen to the chatter on the police radio. I fear his mind is full of conflicting thoughts and intentions that he is sorting through moment by moment. I am still very pleased that he arranged all of this himself. Betraying Jack must not have been easy. Knowing his brother officers would die horribly did not deter him. He is Becoming, my Will.

He is becoming my Will.

Instead of following me to the front door, Will wanders, seemingly in a daze, behind the house to look over the cliffs, close enough to spike my blood pressure and make my heart tumble. Surely he can't mean to jump now, with so little ceremony?

No. He is merely looking, considering.

"The bluff is eroding," I tell him. "There was more land when I was here with Abigail. More land still when I was here with Miriam Lass."

"And now you're here with me," Will muses.

"And the bluff is still eroding. You and I are suspended above the roiling Atlantic. Soon, all this will be lost to the sea."

Will looks at me then, and I know he has come to an understanding. Should he survive this encounter with the Dragon, with me, even if he is the last man standing, he could always jump and be done with it.

I will not let him, at the very least not alone. Even if I am half dead I will go with him. We cannot be parted and I believe he understands this as I understand it. He is resolute, determined to resist me to the last.

Will is unpredictable. Who knows how this night will end?

I find the key and let us inside the house. Will is deliberate to keep behind me, easing the door out of my fingers to shut it. "Do I bother locking it?" he asks.

"No," I reply.

We stare at one another for several long seconds. Will at last relents, raising a hand to the sore spot on his head where he impacted the side of the van during the escape. He lowers his fingers, checking for blood. There is none. Then he makes as if to slide past me.

I put my hand on the wall, blocking his path. I feel reckless. This could very well be the end of it and while I know Will plans to feed me to the Dragon, at least right now, I can't let him go without some kind of intimacy.

He looks at the arm that I am using as a barrier as if considering breaking it, then meets my eye. I reach out and cup the side of his face, my thumb tracing the skin just in front of his ear, my fingers caught in his hair, their pads tracing its softness, texture. “I do wonder,” I say, in spite of myself, “where tonight will leave us.”

Will’s cold resolve wavers. I can feel it like it is sunlight breaking through the clouds and shining on my bare skin.

“Conversation for, ah… another time. He’s coming. He could be out there right now,” Will says, dropping his gaze again, looking at my chest, then the floor.

“If not now, when?” I try *desperately* not to sound *desperate* .

Will studies the floor for another long moment, as if considering. I see his forehead wrinkle further and an eyebrow twitch, unconscious physical manifestations of whatever he is thinking. He looks at me again, straight into my eyes, holding my gaze for a long moment. Then he leans in and kisses me.

It is a long, beautiful connection, chaste and clean, uncomplicated. First kiss on free soil in three years. When he breaks away he waits, our mouths still inches apart.

At last he draws back. “There will be time,” he says. I don’t believe it and neither does he.

So be it. I drop my arm. “An easy way to avoid a conversation about our future would be to have me murdered,” I can’t help but say.

“That goes both ways,” he replies smoothly.

“Who Will the Dragon come for?” I wonder aloud, trying to read him.

“ And when the fox hears the rabbit scream, will he come running?”

I have to smile.

“You said once," Will recalls, “that you could never entirely predict me. You realized that… *whispering* through the chrysalis was the extent of your reach. And that realization made you touch me in front of a witness. Like this.” He puts his hand against my face now with a loving possession, mirroring my posture the night we saw a man climb out of a horse.”

I do what I wanted to do in that moment, now that we are alone in it instead of being leered at by a serial killer covered on horse innards. I kiss him, winding in my tongue, a deep, delicious penetration that he accepts before reciprocating. Suddenly my pulse is pounding audibly, rushing in my ears as if in time with the waves outside.

And with that, he walks away, deeper into the house, giving himself a tour, no doubt. Familiarity with the surroundings increases his chance of survival.

I head directly for the master bedroom and at last free myself from the institutional jumpsuit and cheap undergarments, throwing them in the garbage without ceremony. I thoroughly

enjoy my subsequent shower in the walk-in, my skin breathing a sigh of relief as I am able to use my imported soaps.

When I come out of the washroom, I find Will sitting in one of the chairs in front of the dead fireplace. He has a whiskey on the small table, the glass of amber liquid positioned next to the metal hulk of his gun. It is not in his hand, but the barrel is pointed my way.

I look at it, then at him. I lift my towel to my hair a moment, rubbing it dry. “May I get dressed?” My question is mild but my body burns for him.

“You may not,” he says, mimicking my tone.

I drop the towel on the other chair and stand to be beheld, and, if I am being honest, ready to be plucked. I am washed, shaved, and perfumed, and I can tell it is affecting him, as much as he is trying to remain aloof.

He drains the whiskey and gets to his feet, drawn to me like he’s always been drawn to me. The gun stays on the table. I watch him warily, but smile when he digs his fingers into my chest hair, curling them against my warm, damp skin.

As if suddenly overcome, Will grips my chest and shoulder and shoves me back into the wall, rattling the picture frames. He kisses me insistently now, with righteous, violent passion, possessive and feral. I close my eyes and lose myself in it, in being wanted, not just by anyone, but by Will, now, in this place, at this time. I take him in my arms, run my hand through his hair, pull him in close by the bow of his back.

He grinds against me. I can feel the cold metal of his belt, the fabric of his trousers, and the hardness beneath desperate to be released. My body responds in kind, moving against him, as if it stood to greet him when he entered a room.

Just when I can taste the sweetness of him, the essence of the man I kissed that first night in Baltimore, that bundle of nerves that couldn’t make eye contact, that was so starved for touch he trembled with pleasure under the slightest press of my hand, Will bites my tongue.

That Will Graham is gone.

It is my doing.

I am suddenly submerged in a murky regret I don’t understand.

Will releases my tongue and eases into the kiss again, but there is blood between us now, the first blood spilled of the night, absorbed and lost in our kiss.

Now he breaks his mouth away. We are breathing heavily in tandem, our collective grip tightening as if some invisible force is attempting to tear us away from one another. I will never let that happen. Never again, even if Will is the one trying to break free.

I realize then that my machinations, my influence, my possessiveness, have all led to this moment where I can find no trace of the Will Graham I knew during those early days when I was training him to trust me above all others.

He is what I made him. A byproduct of his becoming.

Will doesn't realize that one can be a monster, and still love and be loved.

I make him more monster.

He makes me more human.

And we must find a balance, or perish.

Overcome, I nuzzle the side of his neck and face with sincere tenderness in response to the domination of his forceful grope.

His next move is not to soften, but pin my wrist against the wall, grinding my bones against the paint, his other hand locked over my heart as if pushing it away from his own. I try and put my free hand in his hair but he shies away and wraps his hand around my length, determined, it seems to show lust but not connection.

I cannot stop the sound I make. It is pleading, and it makes him smile, a cruel slice. He relents and lets me rest my forehead against his for a moment as he strokes me.

When one is a cannibal, the last thing one wants to be is a piece of meat.

I take him by the fabric of his shirt and force him three steps back before I toss him on the bed with rough abandon. He tries to get up but I pin him down with one bent arm while I open his clothes and partially, sloppily undress him. After a time he seems to accept the situation and helps me.

And we are skin to skin to glorious skin now, after three years, clasped together. I am entirely overwhelmed by his scent and his touch, the taste of his scars, his eager mouth on mine, down my throat, tonguing each nipple in turn. We feast on each other, and he feels like Will again, both his past, current, and future self. He performs fellatio and I multitask, stroking his hair, moaning, and groping open the bedside drawer.

Now I've flung him off me and pressed him down into the bed, holding him by the neck, a show of animalistic possession. He submits without one word, one glance, one inkling of resistance, and I spread his legs, stretching him hastily before slicking everything with hurried hands. He is trembling now, at last, again, at my touches, in anticipation of my penetration, which splits him hard and fast. He lets out an unbridled sound and I press my face into his neck at the next thrust. One more, and I close my mouth against the round of his shoulder, marking him as I stroke him simultaneously in the front.

His hands climb over me, nails digging into my back, fingers quivering against the undulating muscles as I thrust. He tilts his head back, closes his eyes, mouth open, breaths short and frantic as he squirms and sweats and blushes under my treatment. His forehead scar is stark against it.

He climaxes against my hand and his stomach, clenching around me. Miraculously, I manage to stave off my own. I pull out and turn him over, still panting, and haul him up around the

middle. He only just finds his balance on his hands and knees when I spread him and connect us back together again. My body envelops his. I clutch him close, as close as we can be, one of my hands over his, our fingers entwined. I can't resist pressing my face into the back of his neck, grazing my teeth there before I rock back on my knees, take him by the hips and drive in. I hit my target and he exhales a deep, mellow sound of appreciation. Only then do I spend.

We rest. I tuck my cheek against his damp, sweet-smelling neck and breathe before gently pulling out. He angles back and shifts to bring our lips together. I brush an errant curl from his forehead.

"You can get dressed now," Will allows. I smile but he doesn't return it.

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I find Will looking out of the floor-to-ceiling windows as if trying to pierce the darkness, or rattle it with an unwavering stare. I bring with me a bottle of wine, two glasses, and the corkscrew. "You're playing games with yourself in the dark of the moon."

I ask him if he was surprised to hear from the Dragon. He is in no way surprised that I have inferred his plot. His answer confirms my deduction.

"Do you intend to watch him kill me?"

"I intend to watch him *change* you," Will corrects.

I am simultaneously so proud of him I could burst, and desolate, a piece of me still in mourning. I trust it will pass, just as I trust that the urge to kill him myself will pass. I purposely put down the corkscrew. "My compassion for you is inconvenient, Will."

The way he speaks to me now, I wonder if he believes Bedelia about my love for him. Perhaps now he sees it for the weakness it is. Bedelia would want him to crush me.

The gunshot shatters the wine bottle, and then the plate of glass behind me. The pain is secondary to my curiosity. What will happen next?

Will watches me bleed on the floor for what feels like a very long time before he tries to pull the gun. He knows I find guns to be impersonal, cheating almost, but considering the difference between him and the Dragon in size and strength, proven twice over now, I don't begrudge him his choice.

It doesn't matter. The Dragon stabs Will in his face. Of course he does, the deformed man seeking to mutilate what is clearly so much more beautiful. I spend a precious second making sure Francis's camera is pointed out the broken window. The Dragon was correct in that watching the film will be wonderful, but not as wonderful as the act itself; however, what is about to happen should be recorded for posterity.

What unfolds next is a magnificent chaos that synchronizes into a fatal waltz as the seals open and the Wrath of the Lamb is unleashed. At last, Will delivers a mortal wound to his

abdomen, sinking in the blade and dragging it, driving deep with the last of his strength. I arc my neck and rip out the Dragon's throat with my teeth.

We come together with wavering steps, breathing hard, bleeding and bleeding. We clutch one another at the cliff's edge.

"See?" I whisper. My heels are inches from disaster.

"This is all I ever wanted for you, Will," I say. "For both of us."

"It's beautiful," he says, and I hold him, the sweetest embrace, as if it was the first time, as if the world were new.

The moment he pushes against me, I fall backward, our arms still around one another. Only the moon knows if one of us acted before the other.

The fall is a vow.

***

When we are suspended in the air, Will goes limp. I clutch him to me as hard as I can and try to curve my body, his with it, so that we hit the water feet first.

Even so, the impact stuns me, and I am momentarily senseless.

When I come to my senses, I am at the surface.

Will is not.

The waters are cold, roiling, black. The salt sears into my open wounds. My body screams at me. I ignore it, even as the freezing waves sap what is left of my strength. I roar his name.

Impossibly, I feel something brush my foot. I dive immediately, flailing frantically in the bitter dark. My left hand feels something like cloth and I snag it with my fingers, squeezing so hard my ligaments shriek under my skin.

It is just enough. I manage to bring my right hand towards my left and I close my grip around an arm.

I haul Will to the surface. He is dead weight. Tucking him under my arm, I use the other to swim for shore. The erosion has left this cove sandy and shallow, and I emerge from the sea triumphant, as if Thetis, sea nymph and loving mother of Achilles, has aided us this night.

I drag Will ashore, his feet leaving grooves in the frosty sand. Cradling his head, I stretch him out on his back and collapse next to him.

I take a moment to recover, coughing, then I struggle up in my hands and knees. "Will. Will." I can only say his name.

I shake him. Harder. Harder still, fat drops of ocean water falling from my hair and clothing onto his immobile face.

“Will,” I plead. My mind is a cacophony of terror, wordless screaming echoing through the halls of the memory palace.

At last, my training returns to me. I tilt his head back and check his airway, sending two fingers into his mouth looking for obstructions. Clear. I feel for his pulse, put my head on his chest.

The silence there obliterates my own heart; panic chokes me. Tears gather and fall and I breathe raggedly, patting his cheeks, crying out his name, its echo fading, unanswered.

His lips are turning blue.

I pinch his nose shut and give him two breaths, then 30 pumps with the heels of my hands. I hear a rib crack but I do not stop. Two more breaths. 30 more compressions. Two breaths.

I don’t know if I can save myself. Maybe that’s just fine.

“Will, no.” I cannot revive him if he has no desire to live. If he lets himself slip away into the dark, a final, fatal rejection of me, there will be *nothing I can do* .

“Will!” I shout it over the roar of the waves and the wind. I feel my body going into shock, shaking all over. “Will, *please*… ”

The two breaths I give are half sobbed. Just as I press my hands together for the next round of compressions, Will’s body gives a great shudder, and water erupts from his mouth. I roll him onto his side and he vomits sea water and wine, sucking in air and coughing raggedly until at last he can draw breath.

I collapse on the sand and gather him to me, rocking, blinded by tears of relief. The beach smells like salt and blood, the dark waters a womb from which we were born.

In time, I get to my feet and lift him into my arms. I carry him away across moonlit sands.

And

CUT.

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